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MARTHA AND MARY

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ARTHA AND MARY

BY

OLIVE MARY SALTER

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To
MARTHA AND A THOUSAND MARYS
UNDER A THOUSAND SKIES

MARTHA AND MARY

BOOK I

"Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house."

LUKE X., 38.

CHAPTER I

I

THE wise old folk of Sussex have a saying that every man in his life has two wives, the real and the ideal; and if the one fails him he consoles himself with the other (which possibly accounts for the number of bachelors in all climes who live the incomplete life with every appearance of comfort and contentment). The authors of this kind adage could not, of course, be expected to have bargained for such gentlemen as Owen John, all head-in-air and twentieth century, who are foolishly unable to keep the two things separate, and spend their lives trying to find the one in the other—which, as all their more worldly-wise friends do as faithfully continue to assure them, is, in the Divine scheme of human existence, impossible.

Owen John Allerton Gawne, of Harmsworth House, Hastings, Sussex, and (irregularly) the Hastings Arts Club, and (still more irregularly) Messrs. Gawne, Gawne—this one in every sense of the word, since he died before Owen was born—and Linlith, Ltd., East India Merchants, London, owed this pathetic liability to peril between two stools to the fact that he was that accursed, crazy, heavenly thing, a writer born. Where he got it from was the mystery; nor Gawne nor Allerton had ever been so troubled, and they spoke of Owen's odd bent penwards as if it had been some slight disease, to the inward mortification of the quiet boy. To be sure, his own father had an admiration so immense for one of the most successful journalists of the day, that he had actually named his house after—the dogged achievement, the will-power, enterprise, brilliant intuition, for which that name stood. Owen, right at the other end of the family branch, hated journalism in much the same way as he hated a lewd woman; both were, to him, impurities somehow distilled from two pure and great essences of life. Owen was most laughably literary, or most superbly, according to which standpoint you viewed it from. The proper word-stringer is a sort of spiritual jam-maker; as fast as they grow he bottles his raw

emotions and perceptions for literary purposes, and they come out preserved and palatable in the form of a heady poem or a problem novel—which perhaps accounts for the fact that men and women with the pens of angels are generally disappointing to know in real life. Young Gawne, however, had either too many emotions, or not large enough bottling capacity. He was apt to allow these raw fruits of the spirit to overflow into his personal existence, and this was very often with the most painful and perplexing results.

II

A number of authors, upon commencing a new novel, seem to believe it would be an incomplete and unconvincing affair if they did not begin with the hero or heroine in long clothes; the idea is, one supposes to show the early trend of character and so forth, but it apparently does not strike them that the reader cannot discover an immense interest in a central character attached to a feeding bottle or a school satchel, and really impatiently waits for the brat to grow up and become interesting. So one may be assured, in less than twenty chapters or so, that Owen, the embryo writer, showed interest in moonlight and flowers at an

unusually early age, screamed when they left him alone in the dark, exhibited, in fact, all the timid, precocious cubbishness of a child born with a pen in its mouth in place of the proverbial spoon. One takes him, therefore, by the nape at the point where he becomes potential and, accordingly worth reading about, a wordless and temperamentally mournful Owen, afflicted with his father's body, his mother's beauty, and his soul from goodness knows where, darkly determined to go his own way, if necessary on his limited income of £75 a year, but at all costs to go his own way. More immediately it happens that he is also on the brink of a very painful—because so restrained and kindly—interview with his own father, concerning a subject upon which the elder and the younger Gawne must ever agree to differ.

"I don't care to heckle my only son," says old Gawne, at last taking a new breathful of patience, "and I'm not keen enough on wasting money to keep any man in a job that doesn't appeal to him. But . . . look here, Owen, what *do* you think you're at?"

Owen sighed gently. He very much wished two things; that his bank balance were larger and his father worse-tempered. "It's these polite arguments that get between parents and children,"

he thought, and said, using his father's tone of restrained contempt; "That's just the trouble, sir, that I'm not *at* anything; I'm the square peg, as any one in the business can see. I don't see why I shouldn't have a shot at finding my square hole."

William Gawne made a motion with his broad, hairy hand that swept all that side of the argument aside into a heap, to await its second innings. "Just so, just so. I grant all that. Now, Owen, look here; you've got £75 a year to live on; that's a capital of about a fat thousand in Gawne's, isn't it? and you've earned perhaps eight per cent. of that. I'm not blaming you. I'm not grudging the allowances I've made you, nor the money you've spent. It's to your credit that you've saved the money, I don't deny that. But there's many a man can save money and precious few can earn it."

"Not in uncongenial employment, no," put in Owen, and felt he had scored.

"Just so; that's all right, but wait one minute. Well, I put it to you that you've earned 10 per cent. of that money. You've written near a dozen bits for the magazines, stories and articles and so forth, and on the strength of it you think you can —ahem! you have an idea you'd like to try to earn your living by writing books. Eh? Now, Owen,

you're not a boy; you're of an age to marry and have a house and family of your own to look after. Well, it's a marrying salary I'm offering you—if you'll only make up your mind to stick to the business. I can't say I know much about book-writing, we Gawnes haven't dealt in them much up till now"—he glanced, with a baffled parent's faint malice, at his son's impassive face, "but I imagine it's hell's grind for a good many years before you'll come anywhere near the position I'm offering you now. You can't afford those years, Owen—at your age. Better come in with me, son, and think about the books afterwards."

Owen looked at his father, the heavy, kindly face, full of that wistfulness of a man unused to being thwarted, and felt for him such a scourging pity as is the nearest that a certain type of offspring can come to passionate affection for its parents. It was a good many generations since the Gawnes had stopped short at a single representative of the line, and now here, by the trick of the devil himself, they stood, father and only son, about as much use to each other as a pipe-brush is to a boot-black. Owen was pleasantly free from that sense of superiority which matoid children generally acquire, often in sheer self-defence. He felt himself to be a mockery of the name of Gawne,

a degenerate: he was crucified by that overwhelming sense of pity for his father's disappointment. But his great instinct was sure and strong. He would suffer, through sympathy, to an extraordinary extent, but at the end of it he would emerge joyfully, and write books on £75 a year.

"I can't pretend to hide from you that my heart's a good deal in this affair," went on William Gawne, clipping a new cigar unmercifully, with half the old one still red in his mouth. "You see, the business is practically all I've got to leave you. . . . Well, well, Owen, I'm getting on, you know, as we all do. . . . A house like this"—he waved the clipper comprehensively, and his son's eyes followed it around the heavy dining room, its leather, its silver, the hangings and oils in big, dull gold frames—"a house like this and the way we live makes a hole in one's income. Of course, it's necessary, and I couldn't deny your mother anything: she's earned it as much as I have. . . . And you understand, I don't want Linlith to have it all his own way when I'm gone. So, you'll think it over, sonny-bun, won't you? I don't want to hurry you—and let me know what you make of it in a week or so."

Owen thought it over. He respected and admired his father, if he could not conceive passion

for him. It was no pleasure to hang him on the string of his own disappointment and sit by to watch him wriggle. But he couldn't unmake his soul. And he knew William better than to suppose a patched-up soul would be any triumph or solace to him. In a week or so he was tramping the solid country behind Hastings and St. Leonards and Warrior Square, and all those extensions of Hastings which had known him in knickerbockers, hat in hand, pen in pocket, heart in boots, seeking a place where one might lay his head for the deceptive annual increment of seventy slippery sovereigns and five.

III

Owen went up the hill and looked at the cottage that way. He went down hill and craned his eyes through the trees and looked at it that way. Then he stood at the gate, popping off old acorns and beech burrs under his boots, from the trees that grew around, and looked straight away up the long flight of steps, past thick, clean-shaven gorse hedges, as impenetrable as any "palisade" grown with miraculous celerity by the Swiss Family Robinson, past the lawn and the lilies and aspens, to the little hearty door in the middle of all. The cottage had two long, narrow windows, set each on

one side of the door, and the arched eaves above them gave to it an appearance of sleepy astonishment: Owen's fancy was that it raised its eyebrows at him as he looked at it, but he liked it none the less for that.

"This gets me," thought Owen, and walked boldly in to reconnoitre, unabashed by that haughty stare of enquiry which the cottage continued to bend upon him. It did not look a very expensive building. The garden was large: it would have been a park in Shepherd's Bush or Finchley, but it comprised a bare eighth of the sloping field in which it stood. From the front, Owen could envisage through the small windows a small furnished bedroom on either side: they shared their virtue with the sitting-room in the middle, which made up for window space by a front door that might easily be left open for seven months out of the twelve. There was also in view, from that angle, a rose pergola shading the grass platform, which had been raised to give at least one spot where a tea table might be stood, in a garden that gambolled hither and thither in a series of gay slopes and hillocks and billows: also one rainwater cistern, of an improved type, on the side wall: also one fowl house, at present, Owen gratefully recognised, to let, unfurnished.

Owen followed a pathway, a true Sussex affair of chalk and asphalt in the following proportions:

CHALK	99
ASPHALT	1

to the back of the house, where he very regrettably surprised an elderly lady in a state of demi-toilette. Owen was naturally modest, and would have retired, if the elderly lady had not looked up and nodded a most affable and natural greeting, and what she had on we can only ask Owen, who will never tell us because of his modesty, but we only know that it was not a blouse.

"I beg your pardon," said Owen, raising his cap with the inclusive courtesy which was one of his pleasant traits. "I had an idea this place was to let."

"Well, it is, queer enough, zur." She spoke the Sussex dialect as broad as it can be spoken, which is saying something. Owen, who liked to feel that Kipling did not know his Sussex better than Owen John Allerton Gawne, was able to follow it with perfect, proud ease. "But the young lady's only jest gone out and they sent me up from the farm to do a bit o' cleaning up. Wur you wanting to look rãound the liddle plãace, zur?"

Owen was, and she showed him the kitchen (in which he affected not to see the latter stage of her toilette hanging over a chair, until she caught them up and dusted the chair with one of them for him to sit down), the pantry smelling of honey and home-cured bacon, the two bedrooms, the sitting-room, the grandfather clock in same, the woodshed, the smuts which the paraffin stove had dispensed over everything while she was out for "two shakes" pumping water, and the well next door to the woodshed which was the cause of the mischief.

Owen was duly charmed and made it his share of the entertainment to tell her so.

"Yais, we're generally full up räight through the summer," she informed him, leading the way round the woodstack towards the kitchen garden: she was determined that nothing should escape him. People täake it a month at a time, or sometimes we'll get a family for the whole summer, like this last young läady who's gone, she'd taken it räight up to October, and then with opshurn of staying on, you see, zur. But she'd been sent for sudden-like, to Australy or some tedious fur away pläace, and so, of course, the cottage's empty for any one as likes to take it, and lucky they are to get it. Of course, it's a verry cheap pläace, because the land belongs to the fairm." She

looked at him enquiringly. "If you was thinking of tăaking it, zur?"

"I'd like to take it very much," Owen assured her, his heart thumping, "if the rent's small enough! I suppose you couldn't tell me anything about that?"

She considered the somewhat disarranged state of the kitchen, most of which lay outside on the cement around the well, pending that same small domestic matter of "cleaning up." "Well, if you could wait while I put these things back—and I'll slip on a blewse and skirt, that won't tăake me a few minutes, I'll walk with you daown to Petteridges. Solomon Petteridge, up at the fairm, he owns this plăace, the tedious, sleepy old varmint, he is. . . . He'll let you know all abaout it."

Owen put in the time inspecting the garden frontage, which included the main drainage and dustbin system—a large hole in the ground hidden on three and a half sides by thick gorse, which contained the odour with extraordinary success. He also had a slight skirmish round by the beehives, which resulted in a casualty on the left cheek, and a better acquaintance with his friendly interlocutor, who treated it most successfully with ammonia and a bluebag.

Passing out of the gate later, that lady stopped

and faced him, twiddling the buttons on her "blewse" with hands that had their trade writ large all over them. "Of course, I always did for Miss Ricketts while she was up there. If you wur thinking of wanting a woman to do fur you, I know the ways of the plăace——"

"I should be very much obliged if you would come and look after me—and the bees," said Owen, in his pleasant way, smiling and with a hand up to the insulted cheek.

"Well, you could mention it up at the fairm. . . . Of course, I'm not the reg'lar woman, like, but they generally send me when thur's not a măaid coming daown." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye with that sudden shyness that contrasts so oddly with the hard, carrying voice of the Sussex labouring woman. "My năame's Champion, Hannah Champion: our cottage is just steps daown the lăane here, before you reach the fairm. I'll do my best to make you comfortable, zur, if you tăakes the cottage."

She led the way with relief written large over that substantial back, and Owen, following and remembering the bluebag, felt his heart go out to her and to the cottage in which this large, comfortable, plain-spoken woman would shortly, he hoped, be "doing for him."

IV

Petteridge's was a large farm, about a mile down the lane. It lay behind a great hump of grazing land that crouched in a worshipful way, like some enormous prehistoric creature, before the cottage, and in later days Owen could look up from his writing in the little sitting-room and see Nora Petteridge, the eldest daughter, a little black speck crawling over that vast side on her way to the pumping station, or Reuben Petteridge driving the cows to pasture, or—in shearing time—Reuben and Solomon together with their two beautiful bob-tails, bringing in the sheep. That was a fine sight which Owen could never resist—the two tearing specks of dogs, laid right back on their sides as they raced and doubled hither and thither over the sloping ground, gradually, and with more than human skill, reducing that flying scatter of white wool flecks to an orderly little cavalcade, moving slowly down the hillside without break or panic. The farm itself had that quality of versatility which never ceased to astonish Owen on his country rambles. It was carried on entirely by Petteridges: in fact, it was their boast and pride that they had never hired help within the memory of any of them. Owen always

had a feeling of awed pity for Mrs. Petteridge after Hannah had told him this, and, indeed, she was a little, wizened, frail woman, of whom one must utterly refuse to believe that seven strapping men and women had been given the breath of this world. But there was nothing that the farm did not "do." The domestic creation, it seemed, almost in its entirety, swarmed about the open spaces that segregated the farm buildings: yet all were somehow kept in fat and health, and their needs severally attended to by some never visible person or means. The Petteridges sent milk every day to the station in their own cart. They had three separate fields full of sheep, and they bred their own draught horses. They did not neglect haying and corn and potatoes, and the usual farming agriculture: they grew their own winter forage: there was an orchard where the guinea fowl ran, and in it a number of beehives, and the garden around the house was always neatly flowering . . .

"A big farm, this?" inadequately suggested Owen, thinking of the single-mindedness one might retain in an East India Merchant's office, with nothing but a ledger and an office stool to distract one.

Hannah turned over her shoulder with an indifferent gesture. "Pretty fair. Ryan's, behind

the Cathedral woods, could put Petteridge's daown in its dairy and forget about it. Of course, they've hired men there," she said, carelessly. "My man works for Will Ryan."

Owen held his peace.

Solomon Petteridge, short, sturdy and gipsy dark, accepted Owen and his prospective tenancy with the tolerant stolidity of the typical Sussex labouring man. Not the arrival of Owen in a drawing-room limousine, waving a thousand-pound cheque, could stir Solomon to any sign of enthusiasm. "Yes, you can hev the cottage," he agreed sadly, his eyes on the far downs. "The rent's twenty. How long did you want to tāake it fur?"

Owen explained that he was taking the cottage for writing purposes and that he would probably want it for a twelvemonth.

"Yais, you can write thur," agreed the tolerant Solomon. "It's quiet enough. You'll want yur slops carried, Mr. Gawne? My second son, Chairlie he generally attends to that and the hoeing for the vegetables. Sixpence a week for Chairlie—or may be yous'll get it done yurself?"

Owen had a vision of that unsavoury pit down among the gorse, and hastily agreed to be saved from re-visiting it for the sum of sixpence weekly.

"I'll write to you about the cottage then, and

let you know when I should want to move in," he added, full of that indescribable sense of the unimportance of his own concerns which the Sussex labourer always can contrive to communicate, although no one can point a finger at his native politeness.

Solomon unwillingly and with difficulty recalled his slow blue eyes from the surrounding farmland. "Ay, ay, Mr. Gawne, just as you like. The cot's thur, it won't run away."

Owen, who wanted to appear dignified and lord-of-the-manorish to match old Petteridge's torpid indifference, found himself a good deal put out by a flock of bawling geese, which formed up in a solid, noisy, truculent phalanx at the mouth of the lane and caused him a perceptible hesitation under the eyes of the old farmer till he remembered nursery tales and plunged boldly through them.

V

"Mother! Moth-ar! Moth-ar-arr! I say, do come down, Mother. Owen's back, and he's bought a cottage."

Thus Mary, long-legged and with the high, white breasts of sixteen gently curving her loose jumpers, Owen's young orphan cousin, whom the

Gawnes had adopted when she was seven years old, in a rather pathetic attempt at defiance of their own restricted family. Something had gone wrong after the birth of little Owen, and the "quiverful" they had vaguely promised themselves—that quiverful which was the accepted right and tradition of all the Gawnes—had faded, under stern medical eyes, from their view. William and Nancy Gawne belonged to a simple and unemotional race: they lacked to the uttermost degree that poetry and sense of beauty the seeds of which some spirit other than their own had sown in their son's soul, but they had touched some heights of human pathos then. William spent wretched weeks deciding how best he could break it to his wife, still bedridden and chafing against the inactivity, when she so much wanted to be up and doing for the little, pink, impudent Owen.

"Poor Nan! She'll take it hard." Women, he knew, were tedious unreasonable creatures. It wasn't in Nature that Nancy, forbidden children, would not eat her heart out for them. Women, with their whims, their patchy passion for suffering and sacrifice, were queer.

"No more poor times for my little Nan." He tried it that way at last, coming with relief upon

the familiar, tender ground, after a vain and tearful struggle with harsh medical terms, rude things, unpronounceable and meaningless. . . . "You're just to be looked after and have an easy time and play with the baby we've got. Why, what a spoilt rogue he'll be, with no one else to take off his mamma's attention! He'll be a prize baby, that chap."

Nancy reached up and drew his head down to her grave face. "I didn't mind the poor time," she whispered. "Not seeing it was you."

William choked: the impotent male choke in the face of overwhelming emotion, which corresponds to a woman's tears. He said, brokenly, without any sense of contradiction, neither had she any: "And now I can't give you any more!"

She pressed him close. "Never mind, we've got a beauty." But he was hardly beginning to feel comforted by the calm way in which she took it, when she suddenly pushed him away from her and went off in the most extraordinary way. "I don't know why you can't be content with what you've got! After all I've been through! *Men* . . . No sooner I've brought you one baby than you're worrying about the next." And she turned face downwards away from him on the pillow and burst into a regular temper of tears.

William stood looking down on her with a face of distress and bewilderment that, if it had not been so tragic, must have been comical. But, with a delicacy of sympathy which love only could have inspired in so true a Gawne, he went over to the cot, picked up the little Owen, warm and smooth and soft as a bit of kneaded dough, and laid him down by his mother, and rumbled softly from the room.

"Bab," said Owen. "Bab, bab, bab-bab. *Gobbul.*"

"Bill!" cried his mother, and concealed the rest of it in the pillow and Owen's fat neck.

But his courage had failed him and he heard her, after all, through the door.

So, when the only Owen was sixteen, Mrs. Gawne stilled the faint cries that had disturbed her heart's peace since his first day at school with the seven years old Mary, enough of a handful to keep any woman from vain regrets. Mary was sufficiently unlike Owen to fill the gaps he left, but neither child was any real absorption to the solid and unimaginative Gawnes. Mary was kindly called a cousin because this prevented her obligation to William and Nancy from being too heavily underlined, but the connection was in reality of the slightest. She had French blood in her veins

and knew what British Columbia was like before Owen had seen Charing Cross, for she was an emigrant's child and the sea had given her birth. But she was healthy and athletically inclined, and matured slowly, and the Gawne atmosphere clung more closely to her impressionable soul than it did to Owen, whose all absorbing instinct lent him a one-sidedness which nothing could gloss over. As yet they took not much interest in each other.

"Owen's bought a *what?*" Nancy's voice could be heard, intermittently interrogative, through the opening and shutting of drawers.

"Look here, Mary, do shut up. Pater will think I've gone mad," protested Owen. He felt proud and substantialised, but that interview with his father over the Gawne, Gawne and Linlith affair was not easily forgotten. "I said, taken it —to let, you know, not bought it."

"Oh, Owen! You'll let me come and stay week-ends with you, won't you? Is there anywhere for me to sleep? But I shouldn't mind a bit where I slept. Is it far from Hastings?"

"This boy of yours has been and deserted us, Mamma," said William to Nancy, when she had rustled down and they were all seated at lunch. Owen felt intensely relieved that his father had opened the subject. If he had been as disgusted

as Owen feared about the business, there would have been a stony silence. "Mary tells me he has taken a furnished cottage near Chiphurst. Pretty country round there: I've cycled through it in my young days. D'you remember, Mamma, we had a spill with the tandem on that hill that leads to the Bexhill Road? . . . Well, Owen, let's hear all about it, now you've done it. And what's that you've done to your cheek?"

Owen explained that he had been stung by a bee, but he did not go into detail, because the notion of his having three hives full of truculent bees to look after for a number of months was so entirely ridiculous. But he told them about Solomon Petteridge, and Hannah, and satisfied his mother that the latter was competent to look after him during his lonely sojourn. "Such a nice woman, mother: a superior sort of creature, though she did entertain me in her petticoat and thingamy. A sort of lodge-keeper type, I should think."

He kept on reflecting: "How strange that we four should be sitting here and discussing the business so amicably! For if ever there was a try-on at breaking away from one's family, this is, and if ever a son was a wilful disappointment to his father I am."

"The claim of blood can separate blood from blood only."

"I *must* make good. If this friendly attitude is really only because they think I'm going to come a cropper. . . ."

William enquired closely into the rent, and how Owen proposed to make the £75 cover his expenses for that first year of work, but he made no offer of help, and Owen, satisfied that this meant he was to be put on trial, played that seventy-five pounds to cover an astonishing amount of value.

"Living's so cheap in the country," he parried his father's occasionally lifted eyebrows. He was almost tempted to mention, as an illustration, the honey he would get from his bees.

CHAPTER II

I

CHIPCOT, so they called it, was enveloped in a passion of rain the day after Owen took possession: the top of the hills was in clouds, and Owen, dying to get at his book in the cosy, early lamplight, had to put in an unattractive evening rigging up a board to protect the kitchen window, a pane of which had been blown out in the afternoon. The cottage seemed to have been built, by some architectural oversight, in the centre of a stationary cyclone. One had but to set the front door or kitchen door ajar, and all the others blew to with an indescribable Lewis-gun effect. The lamp flittered out twice, and Owen began to consider the comforts of Hastings' municipal electricity for an easily distracted author. He was having his first lesson in those various curses which bestrew the path of the working writer: the extraordinary drop and difference between that spur and fever which sends them back over and over again to their work, and the blank disgust and sense of

unfitness for any creative effort with which the mere sitting down to their desks will assail them: the horrid gulf between plot and incident: little, awkward, irritating checks to a really fine scene, hanging upon such trivialities as a date, or a point of law. . . . Owen had spent weeks at home building up his plot: he had worked it out to the last detail, and there, in the very first chapter he could not even string his dialogue together for want of the incident to hang it upon.

"The struggles of writing are the thing," he told himself manfully, tearing out the ninth page in his manuscript.

"If I didn't *know:* if I didn't feel this necessity, this pulse of God within me. . . .

"The wages of Christ is death. Nothing that lived beyond death, nothing that spoke with the breath of Christ, came forth without agony and bloody sweat: that, at least, one knows.

"Brainy sweat——

"And, perhaps, some day, clerks and typists will be skipping and jeering at this stuff that's been torn out of the sticky guts of me, will be given, for a few lousy coppers, the right to skip and jeer——"

It was eerie, in the creaking, straining cottage, perched so high and aloof on its sloping hillside, and he saw Hannah off, with her lantern, at nine

o'clock, with reluctance, a funny, sturdy, reassuring old figure, trailing clouds of black waterproof behind her and weirdly translated, in the twinkling of an eye, into a single glimmer of light, mincing downwards to the gate.

Next morning he rose to find the sun shining, the wind cowed, and his letter box, a wooden affair with a lid that hooked to the porch, lying on the steps, its contents scattered. A kind, uninteresting epistle from his mother, full of f's that meant s's, and signed in the formal Gawne way with her whole name, had taken refuge under the porch seat, and was not much damaged. But there was a postcard from Mary almost undecipherable, and another letter lying face upwards on the lawn, with nothing but the "hurst" of Chiphurst, and "Sussex," very watery, left of the address. The rest was Sussex clay. He set it on the stove to dry, took, his breakfast in a shower-bath of sunshine spraying through the front door, and then set off for that tramp which he allowed himself before settling down seriously to his typewriter for the morning's labour.

The lane towards the farm intrigued him, especially since Hannah had informed him that about its production beyond the farm a ghost was well known to wander: as an apparently corporeal

phenomenon it had been seen by a number of people to disappear through hedges and fade into trees, and at night sometimes Petteridge's dogs would not sleep alone. And a horse had once hacked its stall nearly to pieces and been found in the morning dead of spasms. Owen could have done without this information in the eerie, windy twilight, but dew and sunshine put a different construction upon everything, even ghosts. However, he thought of the broken kitchen pane, and decided that it would be soon enough to tell Solomon when "Chairlie" Petteridge had been to his gruesome task among the gorse, and the woods claimed him after all.

It was a pretty streak, he thought, an odd bit of county-love which took him where he felt, that had prompted the harsh Sussex labourers to the name. The Cathedral woods, or the Cathedrals, as they nearly always called them, pride showing quaintly through their off-handedness, were a phalanx of massive pine timbering standing opposite Petteridge's hill, beyond the dip where the stream ran, high on a spur of their own and a landmark to those in the valleys for ten miles about. By some remarkable accident of planting the trees grew in neat, unswerving rows, and between them ran aisle after vaulted aisle, as far as the eye could

follow, walled by the vast, brown, naked bodies of the pines. Owen, walking on the crisp needles in that dusky and unbroken silence, a little, inch-bound worshipper among marvels, called it the Church of the True God, and had impulses towards his hat, but their name, coming from within them and despite themselves, he knew was better. He went home feeling holy and inclined to give his hero a manly, reasonable leaning towards Church matters, instead of the cheerful atheism with which he had meant to inspire him. But Hannah, hard at work with her duster and her tidy soul among his precious papers, soon put that right, and then he remembered the letter he had put to dry on the stove.

It was a bit of a shock when he opened it, to find some person addressing him in an unknown hand as "My dear," simply and without further adornment or any of the irking business formality to which he was accustomed. Owen's relations with his blood-kin were strained, through neglect on Owen's part, to a point where correspondence became unlikely. He had visions of a single aunt, an aunt on the Allerton side, who had bothered him tremendously when he was about fifteen and getting cubbish, by writing him long, authoritative, capital lettered epistles, designed to draw him

early to the comforts of the Confirmation Service. Owen was not religiously inclined just then, and he did not mean to be confirmed before he jolly beastly well had to, and he did not answer those letters. But at twenty-five years of age he might reasonably expect to be beyond the machinations of those who perceive confirmation as the crisis between heaven and hell of all child life. Moreover, the address—simply a number in Maida Vale—was strange to him.

In the midst of his bewilderment came fluttering out dramatically from the letter in his hands, a thin two-by-three snapshot, ill-toned and incompletely washed, which he took up gingerly and examined, brows lop-sidedly lifted, for a long minute.

Shortly he became interested to read on.

"Well, how goes pen and ink?" (the letter enquired, with affectionate appropriateness). "There is a spring sun here which wakes all the maggots in one's bones, and the city fattens 'em daily. You'd like to see my big, tame one, that sits up and begs, and barks, and runs quickly up and down inside my spine, wagging its tail, when the postman brings your letters. . . . Whereby the labourer is no longer worthy of his hire. For my Happy, Useful, Business Life, which I planned for myself with such goodwill, is rapidly coming to the ground

between you and your cottage, my friend! The Lord, in reality, intended me to be a novelist, and, too, of the best, most expensive kind, which can only nov. in the perfect quiet of a country cottage, upheld and stimulated by one portly Hannah of motherly aspect and one brace beehives, lovely lively insects, in good swarming condition, each provided with one large size red-hot needle in its little behind——

("Now, how the devil—?" said Owen at this point, fiercely pink beneath his aged Panama.)

"This is all rubbish, my dear, and irksome to you who have serious work on hand, but what work was ever serious to a poor woman in spring-foul London? And so, you see, you are not to say I didn't warn you if one week-end I come bleedily through your gorse wall, just to see what it is like to write books under ideal conditions, and to take a look at you——

'Your brown face, that's full of pity, and wise,'

or inky and raging, is it? But even so, we feel odd and shy without it between us, my four walls and I. If only the Lord had put the ink-bug in *my* head, too . . . instead of fields and green leaves in my heart, like a flea in a dog's ear.

"God be with you, and with Henry your hero,

and with his girl (or girls) and with your handmaiden, Hannah."

And here the letter abruptly ended. The signature was obscure, but close scrutiny revealed it to be a very black, very thick, very uncompromising "Martha."

Now, the name of Owen's hero was not Henry. Indeed, he changed from day to day, but at the present moment he happened to be Bernard Charles.

"Some silly jugger——" began Owen, indignant. He thought of Mary. But then the next moment he took up the photograph and searched it for a long time, this way and that way, and then he looked up and away, over that great breast of land, upturned to the sky, which lay before him, with that wistful look which was so much his father's, and yet had in it an added quality of loneliness: inherent loneliness, which of all kinds is the most hopeless and the most intense, because the least conscious. And, as he looked, there also struggled in his face longing, rarely and suddenly, and immense desire for companionship.

II

Young Gawne was chaste where women of every class were concerned. His art made that easy and

natural, especially while it held that sacred force and claim upon him which lack of outlet means for the true writer. But this very lack of easy experience gave him a capacity for strong reverences and idealisms when he came into contact with the opposing sex. He dreamed, like a boy, not of possession, but of tenderness, infinite and gracious, and divinely condescending. In his heart, though he adored and reverenced his poetic quality, he thought Rupert Brooke rather a precocious young cub. . . . He was quick to note the undercurrent of tenderness in the letter before him, which not all the nonsense could deny. And there was, despite that same nonsense, a literary quality about it which appealed to his strongest instinct—

With love,
MARTHA STILL—

the back of the snapshot told him, in that same broad, black hand, helpfully.

"Hannah!" Owen shouted from the sitting room. "Hannah!" he shouted across the well, from the kitchen door.

She appeared, finally, struggling up the steep slope of the kitchen garden, her arms and apron full of moss-embroidered twigs from the dell below, where the stream ran.

"Them dratted boys has been in, sneaking all my drop-wood, tedious little thieves they are," she said, wrathfully, dropping her burden on the spotless cement. "Did you call, zur?"

"I want to know if the young lady who was here before ever had letters from a lady in London of the name of Still," Owen began, feeling rather like a pickpocket giving information against himself.

"That's raight, zur. Miss Martha Still, Maider —Maider Valley, was it, in London——"

"Maida Vale?"

"Maider Vale. Reg'ler bosom friends they was. Miss Ricketts often spoke to me about Miss Still. They used to live together in London before Miss Rickett's took to this book-writin'—same as you, zur. She'd hear from the other young lâady once and twice a fortnight before she went away, and write! Great long letters she used to write her. I often said to her, I said, 'Miss Ricketts, if you wrote as much in your book every week as you write your friend, you'd be finished before the rent's due.' Then she'd laugh. 'Well, Hannah, she's all I've got in the world, this side of it at any rate,' she'd say. Yes, I 'eard a lot about Miss Still, one way and the other, zur."

"Well," Owen took a breath, "the fact is, I've opened a letter from this young lady by mistake.

You see, the address was pretty well all washed away. . . . I suppose you know where to send it on?"

Hannah regarded the envelope which he held up (cunning Owen, the snapshot was already in his pocket) with something as near consternation as the Sussex woman can achieve above her stolidity. "There's a pity now, zur! Nary an address did she leave, in that hurry she wur packing and settling up at the fairm an' all. And she's never let her friend know! Pore liddle thing. It's just about no wonder, such an upset and worry for her. What ever will you do with the letters, zur?"

Owen looked straight at Hannah, belieing with his eyes the crooked workings of his mind. "Oh, I'll just have to send them back, with a line to explain. She'll have written on the boat, no doubt about it." And, with lame off-handedness, "By the way, Hannah: I've meant to ask you: there's a photograph of a girl on the sitting-room mantel signed 'Esther.' I've often meant to ask you who that was."

"That's my young lady, zur: Miss Ricketts. She gave it to me when she went. She'd a whole bundle of 'em, and she let me pick. You don't mind it being there, zur? It seemed to make the room more lively like."

"Not a bit. I've often meant to ask you," said Owen. He grew suddenly weary of this conversational effort, and retired to the front room with his papers and his typewriter to begin the day's work in earnest. But inspiration must have failed him that afternoon, for the only record of his labours seems to have been a number of little pieces of paper, each bearing a graduatingly exact facsimile of that unformed "Esther" which defaced a considerable part of the sepia on his sitting-room mantelpiece. And on the stroke of nine, to the flap of Hannah's retreating goloshes, we perceive Owen John Allerton Gawne, the embryo eminent author, sitting down to his typewriter at last, and the heading to his chapter is, strangely

"My dearest Martha."

CHAPTER III

I

MARTHA STILL of Maida or "Maider" Vale, London, N.W., and no other address in the wide world, so unattached was she, was destined to remain an enigma to her intimates: that deceptive enigma of the woman who cannot, under press of any circumstances whatsoever, be aught but her ruled and measured self. Most of us can simulate a quality, or an emotion, at will, and so move, continually altering and being altered by this and that about us, through this easily hoodwinked world. But Martha could be nothing but what she was, to put it in good green Gaelic, and her inability passed for unusual and inimitable moral strength. Men have followed this rarer type, unbowed by any wind that blows, through the centuries, always wondering, always baffled, asking ever: "What lies behind?" or, more often, so incredulous of a closed shop window are they, "What wonder lies behind?" and ever asking in vain.

'There's a blind alley somewhere in you, Martha," said a faithful but puzzled critic, once, "and some day someone cleverer than I will find it out."

But quaintly full of queer corners and apt to double back upon itself is her blind alley: small wonder, perhaps, if in this little galley pot of Martha's and Mary's all a-boil together, some get mixed in the process and forget which they are, until indeed, somebody cleverer or closer than the rest "finds them out." And there she stands, this modern Martha, "nothing but sweetness and beastliness," as a perplexed and unhappy Owen one day is to cry upon her, with her quiet mind, that looks out upon the world without wonder and without dread, her power to stir but never to meet the imagination, her little crude poetry books and her little leather account books, and her 20th century veneer starting out from those odd, unsuspected letters to the enchanted Owen. . . .

II

Martha had always had an appreciation of the good things of life, and it continued to be a matter of argument between them that her father, a struggling schoolmaster with exalted ideas of

his own about education, did not view this world and its aims in the same light. "It's too absurd, father, at your age, with your experience, the places you take! Why, you could get a headmastership any day! The degrees you've taken! And you've a way with the boys, once you get really going and forget about all this silly anti-force business. . . . Symonds says, if you'd only keep them at it, you can drive the nails home quicker than any man he's ever met. He says, all you need is a course of lessons on the use of the birch——"

His pet system was a sort of mix-up of the Montessorian idea and strong notions of his own anent non-forcing the brain, its natural, easy development and expansion, with a minimum amount of outside interference. Two hundred healthy little devils, known collectively as the East India Merchants Grammar School, voted it a thoroughly good scheme.

"My dear, I must teach according to my lights. . . . Educating the young is a privilege, a noble duty, a service: it should never have been allowed to become a paid profession. Don't you see, Martha, little girl, my teaching is the nearest I can come to a religion. . . . It *is* my religion. . . . A man must worship as he is moved to do."

"But, father"—she was always urgent to rein him back into the practical road: "how *can* you teach—well, Euclid, to a boy by taking him out and making him look at cart wheels? Your way *isn't* a service . . . not to those you want to serve. . . . These things have to be whacked and shouted and swatted into boys. They won't learn unless you make 'em."

Then he would round on her in triumph. "That's what you think. Now—" and he would pour on her, letter for letter, the latest Montessorian reports, the latest lists of infant prodigies, all the string of incontestable proofs that she knew by heart. To which his daughter, desperate and determined:

"What you won't realise. . . . All these are babies, blind, dotty, deformed, anything that makes them quiet and amenable and willing to be busied. Not the wooden-headed little eels you have to deal with. As if you didn't realise by now what little devils, what lazy little devils they are——"

And so on, with the sullen sickening accompaniment of middle-class economy, that modern monster which selects always the mothers of families for its first victims, and steals them, imperceptibly, hour by hour, year by year. . . . Came a day when the wearied Mrs. Still sighed and

died, and Martha, violently roused, preached to her father an unrestrained sermon upon the bloody and murderous selfishness of man. But even his "religion" could not console the little schoolmaster for the loss of his wife, and with the spring came freedom, indeed, for Martha, a sore freedom, black-frocked and brightly lonely. . . . She had the power, exaggerated beyond dreams of women, of locking sorrow within herself beyond the reach of any kindly key that offered. It was very trying for people.

"I'm sorry," said poor Martha at last, perplexed by these constant demands upon her emotions. "Of course, I've been unhappy. I have a great unhappiness. But—I suppose I'm funny—what *is* there to say about it? If I could think of anything, indeed, I would say it——"

Those who have gone to comfort the distressed, with sweet words of sympathy upon their tongues, and sweeter, protecting movements of compassion in their minds, will know what it must have felt like to be one of these consolers of Martha, and by Martha to have been sent thus overflowing away.

III

But her father's wretched little affairs, cleared up, and his still more wretched effects spelt work

for Miss Still, and with her characteristic calmness she set about getting it. That meant a course at a secretarial college, the *Daily Telegraph* every day, a secretarial post, a tiny "flat," consisting of one room and use of bathroom, more posts, more flats, finally the one in Maida Vale with Esther Ricketts, a college contemporary with literary leanings, an "allowance" and high hopes. . . . And here comes Martha, the Martha that we know, into our story, and into Owen's dreams . . . a boy's dreams, yet, of reverence, and a hand, perchance, leant down to be kissed, but destined to be born again of a hot mid-summer's eve, a man's dreams of passion and possession, and destined, also as dreams are, to die one day beneath the sharp sword of morning light.

CHAPTER IV

I

So Owen continued to solace his lonely meals with those letters and to find an increasing, shameful joy in the ease with which a young lady in a Maida Vale top-floor back might be induced, by means of a typewriter and a postage stamp, to open her maiden heart to a totally strange young man in rural Sussex. His first letter, which had only sneakingly bethought itself of a sequel, developed into a weekly correspondence of three, and they ranged over every subject under highest heaven with an ease which thoroughly astonished and scandalised their author. Martha never spoke of her people, and Owen had gathered, delicately, from Hannah her opinion that these were a sore subject.

"A lot of bad 'uns, *I* think," she confided to him, through the remarkable headdress of gauze and cardboard which she donned when coping with the bees. "She 'ad a lot of trouble to break with 'em, I 'eard, before she cäame to live with Miss

Ricketts." She waved a section, indignant. "There justabout ought to be a divorce court for families, there shud."

Owen smiled. "Well, I suppose I've divorced mine, practically, without any legal help." He thought of his parents and Mary with the tenderness of separation, and felt ashamed because he had neglected his mother's letter for this unknown, unsubstantiate Martha's. "Oh, well, it'll soon enough be over now," he thought, bitterly. "If that Ricketts person's written on board——"

He had a good deal of difficulty in accounting for the typewriter, and finally had to invent a windfall in the shape of a short story published, which was dangerous. And he grew shy of that signature, and discovered great ingenuity in inventing humorous nicknames, which might be typewritten in inverted commas. "Incipient Ricketts" was one of his brain-waves, closing a description of the sweat he was in, over a restive chapter. Another distinct failure in a time of stress was "Nearly non Est (her)." He often wondered what she thought of his foul puns, but they served their purpose, and he was really a very bad forger. Sometimes, when verbal signatures failed him, he would draw a telling, if not anatomically accurate, sketch of himself in some

humorous situation and let that serve. And once he foresaw ruin, when complaints arrived of the continual typewriting ("I might be your broker," wrote an indignant Martha), but he got over it by veiled, delicate allusions to writer's cramp, and the many hours daily he was obliged to spend over his manuscript.

And all the time he longed for and dreaded that hinted week-end, when cats would leave the bag in their scores, and a deceived Martha (he unconsciously pictured her, sometimes, when he thought of this time, with horns and hair of fire and a flaming sword in her hand, dim memories of some childish conception of the Angel of Judgment) would deal with him in a manner interesting but fearful.

"After all, it's innocent enough, what I've done," argued Owen, in his uneasy moments. "Lots of fellows 'ud do worse to get a girl who appealed to them."

II

Something nearer repentance came the following Saturday, when he received from Martha an urgent request for the pattern of his summer combinations. Owen was, most naturally, appalled. He thought wildly of approaching Mary, but

could conceive no possible excuse for introducing such a subject. Visions of the enormities which might arise through intercepting a maiden's private correspondence opened before his horrified eyes. Towards luncheon, not having written a page, he grew desperate and rushed to Hannah, his Rock and his Salvation through weal and woe.

"I say, Hannah, I suppose you haven't such a thing as—well, a pattern of combinations you could lend me?"

"Mr. Gawne!"

Owen sweated. He had shocked Hannah, Hannah who had not scrupled to appear before an utter stranger in petticoat and thingamy. What *were* combinations, anyway? He had thought they were woolly things with legs, worn under—worn first of all. Some frightful ulterior meaning . . .?

"I beg your pardon. I've had such a confoundedly thick morning, everything goes out of my head. What I meant to say was, a pair of pants? A—a friend of mine was going to make me some." He waited, eying her, for the deluge of questions, explanations. . . .

"Well," Hannah began slowly, "not to say a pattern, not a paper pattern, that is. I dunno that I've heard of päants being home mäade, unless

she means to knit un. I'll lend you a pair o' Jem's woollen pãanties, ef you wish."

Towards evening, he was presented with a pair of pink knitted pants, slightly too long in the legs for himself, which he laid in a drawer for a week and then returned to Hannah with thanks and the news that his friend had unexpectedly left the country. And having learned that a paper pattern was what was required, he was able to assure Miss Still that he had unfortunately mislaid it, but would send it whenever it turned up.

"It was all right about the com. pattern," wrote Martha, in reply to this: "I wanted to lend it to Joan Haitey: do you remember her? a fat girl with glasses and awful dandruff. She is getting married in July—my dear, some men must be hard up for a life-interest, mustn't they?—and is keen on making her own underclothes. I knew she would love your pattern, but now, luckily, she is all for wool next the skin, so I've offered her my crepe knickers instead to copy.

"Fancy getting married with wool next your skin! She deserves a divorce."

"The girl is bored to tears about babies. Doesn't want 'em. . . . I wonder why some women get married? We want, and we don't want, and beneath it all, beyond it all, we're all of us women

made to bear, with the biggest will, the biggest strength, the biggest instinct in the world to do that one thing worth while. . . . And we go and mess it up with this clutter about pain, sacrifice——"

Owen was inexpert upon such matters as the potency of wool worn next the skin to affect married happiness, but the holy mystery of human propagation was a subject near his heart. He had the extraordinary capacity of some men to comprehend maternal instinct, the urge and whim and throb of it, to the minutest detail: just such another odd fusion of instinct as gave Brooke his amazing "Mary and Gabriel," and, shyly he wrote back:

"Bearing your husband's child must only be like bearing your husband's love: both mean pain for you, but it's a royal pain, and pain you wouldn't do without.

"This love of the body and of the spirit that a man gives his mate to hide and to care for, and to bring forth in its time, perfection——"

(Though, in the midst of his exultation he was slightly scandalised at the freedom, the ease, the unblushing public ease, with which woman opened, each to the other, these mystic Holies of Holies. . . .)

To which Martha, in reply, said she loved what Esther had written about babies, but how Esther had changed! She could not have believed it of her. Would she be writing to say, next, in point blank defiance of all her old theories, that she would like to get married?

Esther replied, after long thought, that she thought she *had* changed considerably. Something about the country made you feel like that. Yes, on consideration, she almost thought, even, that she would like to get married.

CHAPTER V

I

OUR friend, Owen, alias Esther Ermintrude Ricketts, alias the Compleat Cad (his own euphemism, this) did not now dare to think of the moment when he should be unveiled, "Non Esther" indeed, before the righteous wrath of Martha. "I shall have to end it," he said, with every letter that went. "I must end it." Cowardly, he decided that at the first hint of her coming he would walk out of the cottage and leave Hannah to make any explanations which might become necessary. Against that warred the desire, stronger daily, to see her, to hear her, to find translated into its bond of flesh the spirit which had been made manifest to him . . . to make love to her. . . . His work was suffering: like the misty Esther, he spent as much time and thought on his letters as on the book that had seemed all creation when he first came to the cottage. All that anticipatory bouquet-throwing and trumpeting and clapping triumph which no would-be author can entirely

forswear, had gone from his head. He almost left off caring whether the book went on or not. He sometimes thought, ashamed: "If this is all my 'bent' amounts to! All that great urge and instinct in one, flattened out by the first fresh interest. . . . Human nature is so little affected by work, environment. I suppose stokers enjoy a bright fire as much as we do. Bus drivers would have private cars of their own if they could."

Correspondence with his family had become strained. On the first Saturday that the cottage had been pronounced "straight" by Hannah, his mother and father and Mary had motored over to tea, and Mary had begged hard to stay the week-end, but Mrs. Gawne, privately thinking it questionable, delicately dissolved the plan. Owen made sure that the incident was all part of a scheme to make him heartily sick of his solitary adventure, and suddenly became furious.

"A child of sixteen—and your own son! Brought up together. Such nonsense! You insult me, mother, and you reflect upon your own upbringing of us both."

His little show of temper was mercifully rounded off by screams in the distance from Mary, who had found the beehives and reaped the naturalist's reward, but it remained a sore point between

mother and son, and letters became less frequent, more practical, less tenderly solicitous. His father never wrote except on pressing business. Mary's amazing scrawls also fell off, whether as a result of home pressure or new interests he could not guess, and he oddly missed them—the most natural of the lot.

"I've made my bed: I'm evidently intended to lie on it," thought the rueful author, and more and more he came to rely entirely upon those stolen letters from Maida Vale for the personal interest and sense of companionship which most home-bred men cannot do without. He developed an extraordinary aptitude for feminine correspondence. He took in *Home Chat* every week—ostensibly as an attention to Hannah, but he read it privately with an eye on the kitchen door when she was working in the garden—and with the help of this and Providence and his own journalistic instincts, he exchanged dress notes and cookery recipes, answered domestic queries, gave restrained and reasonable advice upon matters of the heart, and generally conducted himself, a perfect Eve, from the crown of his hoary Panama to the tips of his No. Nines.

The last letter he was to receive from an unknown Martha came with the dusk of a blood-hot

June day, and brought with it a mixture of joy and distress that kept Owen looking, sheet in hand and immovable, for a long time over the hill—his Hill of Inspiration, as he liked to call it, though in truth it had failed him of late. In a moment of rare emotion Martha had written: "I said the other day that you had changed and tonight, suddenly, I realised that change, indeed, in a broader sense, had come about for both of us. For, somehow, you've grown more dear, inexpressibly more dear, these last weeks. . . . I begin to understand how there's a quality in woman's friendships that rides over any sea of passion or sex-tenderness that men can raise about us to engulf us. Up till now I've been proud, I've thought that our friendship was independent of absences, differences: a free and level, impersonal thing that was pleasant and convenient without the ache or trouble of love. . . . And now, lately, I come to see how I've been all wrong. . . . I need you, I want your actual presence beside me. I have a picture of you in my mind that I cannot lay aside.

"I sit here, with your darling letters in my hands, and wonder what it is that you have done."

Sitting there himself, in the high, clear, windy dusk, a carved or frozen Owen let the flood come tumbling, of penitence and guilty pride, awe and

triumph—a young man's triumph, tenderness that came near to tears. . . . Biggest, perhaps, of all, his pride. . . . He whispered, with his dark head on the pages, broken phrases, thinly edged with weeping, of love, and shame, and shyness, and roaring, scrambling, tumbling love. . . . For a few moments he was a very bowled-over Owen indeed.

"Love," he said, after a while, reviewing it all, "love is the only form of beauty that neither saddens nor satiates."

(He could not help thinking for an instant that that was worth saving for his novel, but who is to blame a £75 a year Owen, an Owen with little tears soaking through his lashes, for that?)

He would end the deception: he would write once more to her (his Martha! sweet aching thought! This new and human Martha, justifying him, claiming at last, as he had always known she would, the divine place he had appointed for her): make a clean breast of it all. If it was within his power he would re-live for her on paper these moments and let them serve, if they might, for his absolution. Thus Owen, manfully, prayerfully, every inch a lover.

In the midst of these high hopes and emotions, stumbling footsteps over the chalk sludge, pause,

the familiar pause of the visitor feeling in darkness for a knocker, then the knuckled catch-rap of the day, indicative of cheerfulness and bon-camaraderie.

Arises Owen, cursing in the lamplessness, and peers forth from his door.

"Good evening. Is it Miss Petteridge?"

But this low and easy voice, full of short r's and careless, slurring consonants, belongs to no Sussex woman of toil that ever lived.

"Isn't this Chipcot? I want Miss Ricketts, please."

"Just a moment. I'll light the lamp," says Owen, and gropes back into his black parlour, his heart beating nineteen to the dozen against a formless dread that assails it and somehow, between agitation and clumsiness, gets a light on the business.

Now, indeed, we may pity or point the finger of scorn at the trembling Owen, according to how this story has affected our several natures. For there in the doorway, neat and proud-borne and of the flesh well favoured, stands his stolen Martha, and behold, she enquireth once again for the woman that is called Ricketts.

CHAPTER VI

I

"Oh, didn't you know," began Owen, foolishly, "didn't you know that Miss Ricketts had left?"

(What a dolt, what a fool! Well, he must wade through now, somehow.)

"Left?"

"Yes, gone away, you know." He meant to give no ground until he must.

"Gone away. When? Do you mean for the week-end?"

"No, for good, I think." (What a dotard.)

"But . . . *When?*"

"About six weeks ago, I believe."

"But that's impossible! I heard from her only a couple of days ago."

"I know," agreed the wretched Owen, dully. He could not more thoroughly and hideously have mismanaged the scene if he had rehearsed it. He, a writer of books (book), a handler by profession of delicate situations . . . !

In the midst of his confusion, the emotion of so

little while ago still pierced in little lightning darts of pain, there and here, here and there. She was worth it. How she was worth it!

"I don't understand you," said Miss Still stiffly, and drew back a pace. He could see that she carried a suit-case. In her heart Martha began to feel alarmed, alone on the dark and silent hillside, confronted by a dark and silent cottage and a strange young man, of apparently doubtful mentality, where she had expected to find Esther and warm welcome.

Owen, sensing it, grew desperate. "I say, won't you just come in a minute, while I explain? This confounded wind—" (The lamp was shimmering.) "I know it looks beastly fishy, but you can trust me, really you can." With some vague idea of stabilising himself before her he dived for his card case, which, as a matter of fact, was reposing among the "not-needed" details at the bottom of his Gladstone. "Dash it! I haven't a card on me, but my name's Gawne, Gawne of Hastings: if you like, I'll come down to the farm with you and they'll tell you that I'm perfectly respectable."

Disarmed by his boyishness, she lost to some extent her look of alarm, and he went on, encouraged:

"It's a long story, and I'm afraid you'll think me the most utter kind of fungus before I've done, but if you'll only sit down and loosen your coat? If my woman—Hannah, you've heard of her—if she'd been here I'd have been able to offer you better hospitality, but she's gone for the night." He went on hastily: "Of course, she only lives just down the road here."

In the kind lamplight, she was the thing of joy he had pictured her, warmly coloured and dark-haired, with the long, cut-away lips that mean effortless giving . . . low-breasted and the shoulders slender through, delicately scooped below the throat to give a perfect resting-place.

"What a mother," was his first thought. "What a mother for a man!"

Martha was a woman of very stately movement: it became her to be so. One could not say that she pounced, but with a swiftness which made Owen jump her hand reached across and closed upon the letter that lay open on the table between them. As she glanced at it, he could see the slow blood come up, deepening the warmth of her cheeks, warning him. Then her eyes came on up to him.

"You've been opening my letters," she arraigned him, in that slow, low voice, looking hard.

Then, like the Walrus, Owen felt the time had come to talk of many things, and all the shoes-ships-and-sealing-wax of his guilty little romance came forth, between bald question and balder answer, the white face of Owen and the red face of Martha, as strange a tale as ever young man had to tell maiden in a lonely, creaking cottage, beneath the benediction of passionate June darkness. . . . At the end of all Martha arose, majestic, took up her suit-case and turned towards the door.

Owen started up. "What are you going to do?"

"I shall walk back to the station, of course." (She had a hazy idea of how she had come, in the darkness, but to tell him, this arrant cad, this adventurer—) "Will you kindly open the door for me?"

Owen said quietly, not moving: "There is no train back to London tonight."

Now Martha had had a hard day's work, as is the portion of those who finish up for the week on Friday, instead of Saturday; she had journeyed down on practically an empty stomach, by the most miserable railway service in the whole of the British main-line system, full of cosy expectations of rest, warmth, welcome, and a hot supper. Instead, as a crown to all, she found the black cottage, this strange occupant, these humili-

ating disclosures. Nobody, least of all the distressed and remorseful Owen, can blame her for that she cast down her case on the floor and, hands up to her face like a shamed child, burst into a passion—yes, I regret to say a regular temper of tears.

"The things I wrote to you! *Anything*, I wrote . . . And you answered them! How dared you answer so?

"Laughing up your sleeve . . . ! I suppose you found it awfully amusing, the way one girl writes to another."

"If you only realised how reverently, how very gently—" began Owen, but she was on to that in a flash.

"Reverence! You . . . to intercept a girl's private letters . . . and babbling about reverence." Something of which young Gawne could only guess at the word "babies" and than a fresh torrent of tears. "Oh! let me go! How you've humiliated me! Let me go."

Well, in truth he was not keeping her, but he helped her to her feet and picked up the little scratched case again and, politely, turned his back while she dealt with a tear-washed face.

"I've been trying to think what you can do," he said later, with his pale face still to the window

and his dreams in ruins about him. "I'm afraid it's no use going down to the farm: they are so early to bed about here, and they've people staying there anyway. Hannah hasn't a room to spare. Won't you," he turned to her, pleading, "won't you try to bear the sight of me a little longer, while I get some supper for both of us and then I'll walk down with you to the 'George.' They ought to be able to put you up there for a night. *Please*——"

She said, impassive: "I don't care for any supper, thank you."

"That's nonsense. . . . Don't you see, can't you understand how it's the very least I can do: the only tiny apology I can make for—for bringing you down here on false pretences, to offer you all the hospitality in my power?" He crossed to the spare bedroom door and flung it open. "I expect you'd like a freshener after your journey. You'll find water in there, and towels." He went to his room to fetch her his own hair brushes, and, coming through into the sitting-room again, heard her already manipulating the ewer behind a closed door. To the kitchen he went with lighter heart.

Struggling with a tin of sardines, that he had pounced on, joyfully, on a top shelf in the larder, her voice behind him made him jump.

"You couldn't open that with a pen-knife. Look—there! you've skinned yourself. Isn't there a tin-opener anywhere?"

She found it, by instinct, in a drawer of the kitchen table, and directed him how to use it. And she asked to be allowed to make the tea. . . . Owen was in the position of a man violently in love who is forbidden by honour to utter a word of it. It entranced and terrified him to have her there in the flesh, working, under his authority, at common things, with all this wealth of mutual spiritual knowledge between them, unspoken, forbidden, in honour forgotten. . . . She was calm, coolly friendly, with a dagger behind the friendliness, and helpful. They tried impersonal subjects at first, at supper, but the talk soon flowed back again to something nearer both their minds, and Owen found himself telling her, from the vantage point of at least an armistice, Hannah's account of the famous Esther's sudden departure, cause of all the trouble, and then, increasingly eagerly, of his own pursuits in the cottage, his divided family, his loneliness. . . . At least she listened, taking stock of him the while: his dark and well-cut head, his hands, brown and ink-stained, the red weals and slashes on the breast of his old tweed, where, in moments of concentra-

tion, he had been wont to find a convenient pen-wiper. . . . the boyishness of him that disarmed but did not bore.

He said, in the doltish way that seemed to be his fate that evening, over honey and tea of unusual quality: "You ought to realise, of course, that my—my impertinence succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. All this time . . . I hadn't any but the very slightest doubt, when I wrote, that you'd have heard from your friend in a few mails."

She had a queer trick of looking at him out of the corners of her eyes, without turning her head: it gave a fleeting impression of shy slyness in quaint contradiction of her calm way. "Oh, that's all in keeping with Esther. She'd write to me every day for a week and not at all for a month. Any little fresh interest that cropped up would be enough."

"But Australia!" he urged. "Rather serious, to go off like that."

"Well. She'd been expecting it, most of her life. We both knew there'd be a break some time. . . . As to writing, of course, a new bird's nest in that gorse bush would have done it just as well. She'll write all in a burst soon. I know Esther."

Later, when they were ready to set out for the "George," he said, unthinking: "I'll have to

lend you a coat: it's chillier than you think on these heights: I expect you're rather lightly clad."

The moment he had said the words, it struck him: the gaucherie, the utter tactlessness. . . . He probably knew intimately, by hearsay, every stitch she had on, and she knew it. . . . He looked up, with guilty cheeks, met her eye and saw his own thought slowly born there. Then a rather wonderful thing happened, shaping, as it did, the course of several destinies: the corners of Martha's mouth drew down, the lids of her eyes began to close: at last, as if by a spring released, both flew up, her face relaxed, she fell back into a chair, alight and shaken with delicate laughter. Owen, by the door, gave way a second later: he leaned against the lintel, roaring his great Ho—Ho's! doubled and gasping.

"Your lemon curd!" cried Martha. (It had come straight from *Home Chat.*)

"Oh, Haines!" shouted Owen. (This was a gentleman at the office, whose attentions Martha had doubtfully and delicately discussed, as became a discreet maiden, with her bosom friend, Miss Ricketts.)

"Babies," whispered Martha.

"Com—com—combinations," wept Owen.

When they had grown a little calmer, Owen

strode across chairs and what-nots to her and seized her hands. "I couldn't have presumed before," he said, looking keen and bright with his flush of laughter and rowdy hair, "but, now the worst of the murder's out—won't you please try to forgive me? I had—I had—" he tried to dare, but feared to go too far yet: "I had the very best of excuses."

"Excuses? That sort of thing needs a big one, Mr. Gawne."

"Well, isn't loneliness a big one?" (He told himself: he would put another word before very long.)

She looked at him. "I *ought* to be unable to bear the sight of you. . . . Well, that, at any rate, 'll soon enough be remedied."

"I shall go on writing to you," alleged the impertinent Owen.

She made no reply then, but later, as they slipped, close in the darkness, down the sticky steps on their way to the "George," she said, seriously: "About writing again. . . . That's the one thing, of course, that I couldn't allow."

Owen's heart fell. "But . . . why?"

"Because it would be impossible, indecent . . . with all that knowledge of each other between us."

He said, obstinate: "But that seems to me the very best reason why we shouldn't let each other go. . . . To waste so much comprehension, such sympathy."

In the complete country darkness, than which there is, to the town-bred person, nothing more appalling, he still had to guide her, and when she swayed to him, over the rough ground, he could feel the warmth and soft intangibility of her breast against his arm. She looked up at him in silence, before saying slowly: "That's because you're a man, and you don't understand, you can't foresee, how halting those later letters of mine, at any rate, must be . . . how much of an anti-climax. . . . After all, Mr. Gawne, though I didn't know it for so long," her gentle voice trembled on laughter again, "you *are* a man. And I've met you once. I don't think you'd find further correspondence very interesting."

Between them, all the time, and he knew it, and knew that she knew it, was that last letter of all, that rare and unrestricted document which lay, crumpled and almost unreadable, deep in Martha's pocket, but deeper still, and there indestructible, in Owen's heart.

CHAPTER VII

I

BUT a shock awaited them at the "George."

Chiphurst, proper, lies on a popular motoring route, and in the season cars pass through it at the rate of a few hundred per diem: the owner of the estate upon which the village is built, an ancient baron with a wonderful stable and a stomach which turns at the bare idea of mechanical propulsion, cannot prevent that, but he can and does prevent to a certain extent, the devils from polluting his village by stopping in it. The "George," built in old coaching days, is Chiphurst's one boast in the way of an inn where accommodation for the night may be obtained, and so long as his excellency can keep a bald head above ground, so it will remain. For that reason, it is generally crowded, especially at the week-end, but we could not expect Owen to have known that.

No, they were very sorry, very sorry indeed, but they could not possibly put up the lady and gentleman. Well, the young lady then: they hadn't a

single bed to offer any one. Mr. and Mrs. Carter had had to turn out of their own room as it was. . . . Well, the lady and gentleman had only to look at the garage, at the cars there, to satisfy themselves. They were sorry, thank you, good-night; good-night.

"Now, what d'you think I'm going to do?" Martha wanted to know, when the door was shut on them. She was so tired, she said it quite crossly, and, such is the magic of love, Owen's heart yearned over her.

"It's all my fault. I say, I'm most beastly sorry."

She warmed to his penitence. "Well, it can't be helped now. . . . Isn't there another ho—inn in the village?"

"I'm afraid not." He looked up the silent and ghostly street. "I'd knock up a cottage: but they're so idiotically particular in these parts, and I'm not known in the village. I'm afraid we'd only get rudeness. Besides," he turned about in his mind for a delicate way of conveying it: "You've no idea how these old wives chatter and gossip. . . . It 'ud be all over Sussex by to-morrow morning."

"But . . . what *am* I going to do, then?"

He sensed near tears in her voice, and on a protective impulse took her arm again. "I'm afraid

the only way is for you to come back to the cottage."

"What!"

"Oh, don't be so frightfully prudish!" He made a snatch at his treacherous temper and recovered it. "I beg your pardon, but it's so idiotic. If I wanted to—kidnap you, or offer you violence, or whatever it is you're afraid of, would I have walked down here to the 'George' with you?"

She said, smiling and quite gently: "Aren't you an odd mixture? You won't knock up one of these cottages to get me a night's lodging, because you fear for my reputation, and yet you ask me to come back and sleep alone in your cottage with you, a man whom I met for the first time two hours ago, about whom I know absolutely nothing."

"That's different. I can understand your not liking to trust yourself with me. . . . But as to reputations— You could catch the first train back to town in the morning. You've no people to worry about you. Nobody would know."

"That's a phrase which has always seemed to me to have something of pruriency about it," she said, quietly.

"It counts, all the same." He was sullen, his nice mouth setting in wicked, sulky little lines. So he was the sort of man women couldn't trust,

was he? First, his mother, then this calm and frank-lipped girl. . . . Of what use, then, was chastity?

"Oh, God," he burst forth at last, impatient of her hesitation, "why must you think every suggestion I make has an evil purpose behind it? I tell you, I'll walk the lane all night, if you're so afraid: you can bolt up the doors and put chairs against 'em: I'll give you the bread-knife to take to bed with you."

"Mr. Gawne, please don't be so ridiculous. As if I would do any such thing as turn you out. . . . I daren't begin to try to discuss it with you, you see."

"I beg your pardon. I'm surely a cub. . . . But it riles me no end to think that you—that any girl can't trust me."

He was filled with rare excitement when she suddenly turned, put her hand in his, childishly, and said in her gentle voice: "I do trust you: I haven't the grounds to stand a cat on, but I do. I'll be very glad to accept your hospitality if you'll tell me it's the only way."

His solemnity was terrific.

So, hand in hand, and silently, they walked back to the cottage, a long walk in the windy, murmuring darkness, that came and hit them on

the eyeballs, and made Martha at least, long for his voice to cleave the solid mass of it and let her breathe. She only said, however, waiting for him to unlatch the little gate at the foot of the steps: "I don't know a bit—please don't shout at me—I don't know a bit how awful a thing this is that I'm doing. . . . It sounds affected, but I have really very seldom thought about such questions: what one can do and what one can't."

Owen turned to her. She knew he was smiling. "There's a kindly proverb about ignorance, you know."

She was silent, and he cursed his silly tongue for the second time. Living alone was turning him into a boor. "It is not good for man to live . . ." That wouldn't do, though, either.

Inside the little house she seemed smaller, more childish, less confident of herself and him, and he exerted all his charm of manner to reassure her.

"You'll like to turn in at once, I know," he said cheerfully, when the lamp was up. "I shall sit here and do a bit of work, if the light through the fan won't disturb you." He sensed the panic of a dark and sleep-bound cottage: the comfort and sanity that light and a scratching pen might give. "If there's anything more you happen to want, *just give me* a shout, won't you?"

"You're very good, Mr. Gawne. Good-night." They shook hands, gravely, shy and strange in the soft light that breathed about them, irradiating them.

"Tomorrow," thought Owen, "tomorrow I shall lose her. She said . . .

"Tonight may be my only chance."

But he shook hands, gravely, and in the soft light busied himself with his papers as she went slowly to her room.

Later, he realised with a queer gush of feeling that, though the door was fitted with both bolt and lock, she had in her surety of him neither shot the one nor turned the other.

CHAPTER VIII

I

MAN proposes: God, or, alternatively, some little devil that sits a-hint man to mock and betray him in his best moments, disposes.

Owen's idea had been to tire himself out with work: to betake himself then straight to bed, and to sleep directly, without more thought of Martha-across-the-parlour than was good for him, the clean and dreamless sleep of the just host. But the little devil came and sat on his pen and made it heavy and useless; he sat, instead, listening to the various sounds of getting-to-bed next door: the sharp ring of hair-pins on a china tray: the clank of ewer with basin: faint pattering of bare feet on oilcloth: the dump and squeak of bed-springs: last, and loudest of all in his ears, the silence succeeding. . . . A chaste and inexperienced young man, over-excited and thoroughly in love, can pass over such sounds as these with honour, but not low pulse or easy breath, and Owen soon found that writing was a farce. . . . His

legs, too, kept on detaching themselves from his body and walking, walking, tiptoeing across the room to that bolt-less, key-less door, there to stand, in a listening attitude, with his body, after a minute, suddenly and mysteriously joined on to them. . . . When he found that other Owen over by the door with a slow hand closing over its knob, our Owen thought it high time to get to his own room, and he lost no time until he found himself, a considerably shaken, amazed and disgusted novelist, between the cool sheets.

As if one didn't know the devil's box of tricks by now. Beastly, filthy little tricks. . . . We might all be bits of straw.

"People gass about strain and danger. . . . One never believed them.

"I suppose we're all as dirty as each other. It's this confounded thing, night."

Vaguely, he thought how the wind had died down since they came back from the "George," and wished for its rowdy buffoonery about the house to slash up this silence that, even more than the night, was so "confounded."

He had never before known of the existence of this other Owen, this creature of hideous thought, mad impulse, ridiculous and disgusting imagination. . . . Also, though his mind pro-

fessed its loathing for him, he knew that in the doings of this other strange and foul fellow he was most wildly, most fully, most gorgeously interested. . . .

II

Morning, grey, saffron, amber, then pure sun-colour, and delicately shaken with summer sound, came to the relief of a considerably humbler Owen. It brought also Martha, smiling and friendly, through the door of her room in time to help with getting breakfast, and they ate it together with a good deal of nonsense, laughter, and a general atmosphere of mutual liking that was agreeably in keeping with the dew and song and cool, fresh sunlight of that June morning. It was, Owen thought, rather like meeting after an examination, through which one had passed, somewhat to the other candidate's surprise, quite creditably. Afterwards, she had time to go round the garden, with her hat and coat and case, ready to start, and he had thoughts of Eve and a Sussex Eden. . . . He was not the type of man to analyse a woman's points, but it was jolly to find that the wind and the sun were not less kind to her than his lamp's soft rays.

Telepathetic, she turned to look him well over before they parted.

"You're handsome," she said, suddenly liking his gay eyes, that had in them all the strong, keen light of summer, glancing and twinkling.

"It's handsome of you to say so," he rejoined, laughing, and then, bold: "You took a better word out of my mouth."

One of those sudden and baffling silences of hers followed them down the steps to the gate, swinging in happy nonchalance under its nid-nodding little oaks and beeches. There she stopped, and looked up to the cottage above as he had done on that first day, so long ago it seemed: past the thick gorse hedges, up along between the narrow banks where the daffodils had waved, past the lawn and the lilies and the aspens. . . . She said, with difficulty, bringing her eyes back to rest on his face: "There's something I want to say to you before I go: something that seems due to you. . . . If I thought I was ever likely to see you again. . . . Men perhaps don't realise, when they grow light and easy with women, how the lightest and the easiest of us appreciate real purity of motive, real restraint. And it's because we working women get so much of the other kind of thing, that I made up my mind, long ago, if ever a man offered me something better——

"One comes in time, with all the mess and murk

of city life, to forget that all these things are possible to some men . . . men like yourself, Mr. Gawne . . . more than possible: easy and natural and—and effortless——

"I wanted to make you understand how it was just because I've been made to forget that, that I hesitated last night and offended you.

"If I'd only realised how truly you were to be trusted——"

Owen stood with a foot wedged in the bars of the gate, ready to swing it, and stared at her. This, then, was how women deceived themselves and shaped the world to the sweetness of their souls, fashioning men in their own image. With this sweet confusion, these untroubled eyes, these dear ridiculous lies. In his mind, throughout the trouble of the night, the uppermost fear had been that she, divided only from his tumult by a wooden door, should sense it and add her own to it. And now, beneath the truth of morning light, she stood before him stammering absurd, adorable phrases of gratitude and reproaching herself for a hesitation. Some day he would tell her. . . .

But he took her shy hand in silence: and held it, the morning wind stirring about them and lifting, with gentle, absent fingers, his hairs, while the blood flamed and fell, flamed and fell in their

cheeks. He thought, with a man's wise inward laughter, of the reverences and adorations of twenty years, and of twelve hours ago, as, with strong, slow drawing, he brought her against him, his face to hers.

III

The news of Owen's engagement to Martha was received at home with the usual effort of rejoicing, the sense of defeat and cropping resentment that such tidings bring to most small families, heightened a little by the thought that Hastings girls had not been good enough for him: this unknown Londoner would probably look upon them as provincial and teach Owen to turn up his nose at his own family. Mrs. Gawne felt her pride over, as a man feels his bones after a fall: it was hurt, but not broken, and she consoled herself with the thought that now, at any rate, Owen must give up this ramshackle idea of novel-writing and turn his thoughts toward serious business.

He came to Harmsworth House on purpose to break the news, guessing that a formally weighed, labelled, and checked-in fiancée would be surest of a cordial reception. He looked very well and grown and purposeful, and the two elders remarked in their hearts, with sulky pride, how much the affair had

done for him. "He's a man, mamma," William said, with a new energy lit and fanning in his face. "Perhaps he'll see the need now to do man's work in the world. I meant to let him find out his mistake himself, but if the girl's any good she'll show him. I'll wait and see what she's made of before I speak." Thus the little plot was hatched, and, strangely, Owen brought home that shadow of himself, true seed of the blood and spirit whence he sprang, after which the hearts of his parents had always yearned.

Martha was able to take a week of her summer holiday in late June, and Owen who had found "later correspondence" not uninteresting, as she had prophesied, but a poor substitute, would, of course, spend the time with her at Harmsworth House. (She had, as a matter of fact, meant to go to Devonshire that year for the first time, and had very much set her heart upon it, but she creditably did not mention this to Owen.) He shut up his cottage, with a good deal of regret, thinking how well it and that June week and Martha would have gone together, but they were engaged now: his mother's eye was upon them: daring and palpitating and "un-do-able things" were left behind. He made up his mind, however, that the honeymoon should be spent there, and thoughts of what

had been and what would be were like knots about his heart to stop its beating.

That early time together was happy but halting: Owen was a shy lover and Martha a quiescent one, and intimacy came in gusts with calmer periods between than Owen, at least, had thought probable. Martha, he noticed, never made any effort to end such periods: they must depend, for those warm and quick-breathing moments that seized them like a bright, enveloping mind, upon a touch, a chance word, a look caught unawares. . . .

"Am I childish in this loving business?" the perplexed Owen asked himself, as the days slipped by, each one never so full and confusing sweet as its shadow in his heart had been. "Should I ask more—insist on more?

"One can't *ask* a person to be intimate.

"If she'd only make love off her own bat a little, sometimes——"

Martha, indeed, had to a rare extent the grace and dignity of that type of woman which never invites a caress: the man had yet to learn how her fire lay all in response, and he could not always recover the strength and insistence of that moment at the foot of Chipcot. Easier came the reverential mood, when to touch her was so wonderful that he could not even take her arm. . . .

But his great satisfaction was the favour she had found in the sight of the old people.

"I've been fearfully shy of bringing you home," he told her one evening, smiling. They had walked as far down the pier as the burnt-out part would allow, faces turned seawards, looking down at the ambling waves and listening, at idle intervals, to the band: a civilian affair which Owen felt ashamed of, imagining Martha, serene, bejewelled, and scantily gowned, at the Ritz. . . . The old people had deck chairs in the front row.

"One disappointment in the family was enough responsibility. . . . I don't, of course, mean that I was afraid you would be a disappointment."

If she were too quiescent in the matter of love, she also had the grace of quiescence in other directions where it was more grateful. She never snapped at him, never took amiss such awkward sentences as this. He loved her for it, as he went on, affectionately: "You've made such a hit with them both, and they are very critical, very hard to please, very obstinate in approval or disapproval. I've had just that silent, sulky criticism turned towards me all my life. In a way, I can see, I've redeemed myself before them by making you my ideal, my choice. . . ."

She said, quietly, out of their little nest of

desolate whispering darkness, so suddenly far from the shoreward lights and noises: "Your cousin doesn't like me."

"Mary? She isn't a real cousin, you know: we just call her so. My dear, it's nonsense to say she doesn't like you. Mary's at the intolerant age, and she puts people very much on trial before she'll let go of her shyness. I've always thought that was one of the nice tricks of real youth. *We* take everyone more easily and everyone means less to us."

"She's very like you, Owen."

"Like me?" With surprise, he turned his thoughts wholly towards his cousin. "I've never thought of her so. If you mean physically——"

She said seriously, and he knew her well enough to take it so: "Mary is too near loveliness to be like any one in particular. She'll cut us all out one day. . . . Your cousin's of the type that isn't beautiful but always hovers about it: she's spirituelle, like her name. But I wasn't, really, thinking of looks. Mary's such a child yet: you perhaps won't see it till her womanhood gives you and all men eyes. . . . But she's got much of your brightness and fire hidden in her, much already showing." There was the faintest trace of sadness in her voice as she turned to him and

repeated, low and lingering: "Your fire and brightness, my dear."

Owen had learned, in that week, to seize on a hint of intimacy, to make of it, for himself, a minute's compensation for the cool hours they spent together. He took her in his arms as she turned.

"My fire . . . ! Dear, my dear——"

Her rare flash of forecast, of sad understanding of his non-understanding, passed with the tightening of his arms, as if, with the muffling against him of eyes and nose and mouth, thought also was muffled. In a dim way, she knew then that she could, at least, kindle her body's flame to meet his, and in it the unlit spirit might be hidden from him. . . .

She left nothing in his mind about Mary except that, in some schoolgirl way, she believed herself superior to his Martha, and he faintly disliked her for it.

CHAPTER IX

I

THEY spent the last day of their seven together at the cottage.

Owen's imagination would not leave off making its pictures: the two of them there together alone as they had been before, but with such a difference: Martha, serene, secure, and loving, where she had been mistrustful and antagonistic; Martha with a smile on her lips (her love-smile, that came to baffle him in their most serious and sacred moments) instead of the tremble he remembered: Martha and he on the warm front slope, sun-doped and drowsy, re-living together the panic and hunger of a June midnight. . . . He put it to her the previous evening.

"But, my dear, I promised your mother I'd go down to Plummer Roddis with her to help choose her costume."

"Oh Plummer rubbish!"

"Owen, dear, I *did* promise. And Mary was meeting us from school."

"Our last day, Martha!"

She said, laying a compensatory hand on his arm: "They've been very good, really: we've been alone a *lot*. And you did want them to be pleased with me, didn't you?"

"But, hang it, I meant us to go over for breakfast. I wrote to Hannah to get some grub ready." He looked at her, remembering the throb and the sweet hurt of her in those moments on the pier: the way she had clung down his arms when, at last, he made to disentangle them. "Of course, it doesn't matter about the breakfast, or Hannah either, for that matter, but . . . I only thought you might like the idea of our being there in the early morning together, like we were before——"

"My dear, I do like it, of course I like it. . . . You poor old man! Of course I'd like it."

The Plummer Roddis expedition was put off, but Owen could not get rid of the feeling that he had coerced her into doing, for his sake, something that she was not really enthusiastic over, something that it would hurt or disappoint her not to do.

He hired a car to take them out. Martha was returning to London in the evening from Capsfield, and Owen meant to re-establish himself in his cottage at once. He would have liked to get the good-byes done overnight, and slip out with

her, unwatched, in the early morning, but the old Gawnes knew what hospitality was: they made elaborate plans for waking in time, and Mrs. Gawne, averse to "putting upon" her servants, would herself make them tea to warm them up before they started, if Owen persisted in this mad idea of going off without any breakfast. (He noticed that she did not include Martha in the indictment.)

Martha was friendly, affectionate even, with the old people. They gave Owen an odd feeling that he, not Martha, was the outside one, the stranger. "How she's won their confidence," he thought, watching the old faces, upraised to hers, eagerly, almost.

"I shall be back with you very soon," Martha said.

"Back for good, we hope, my dear."

Owen shook his head, laughing. "We've got some waiting to do yet, I'm afraid. Writing's a long ladder, father: you've often told me that yourself." The atmosphere of cordiality, of mutual approval, made it possible to open that sore subject again, easily and naturally.

He saw a look pass between his father and Martha, a look that puzzled him: it was almost a kind of translated wink.

"Yes, I know of shorter ones," William said, as he turned his gaze upon his son, but he was smiling.

Owen asked hastily, to turn the subject: "Where's Mary?"

"Lazy little girl, she hasn't come down."

"I must say good-bye to Mary." In his anticipatory mood he wanted to be nice to them all. He had not taken much notice of Mary this last week. "I'll just run up to her room." He disregarded his mother's pursed lips.

"Hullo, Mary!"

"Come in," she called.

"Aren't you going to say good-bye to me?"

She stood by the open window, night-gowned. Her hair, that he used to call maple-wood hair, because it had in it just the sudden, curling lights and shades of the wood of their piano, hung straight, heavy with sleeping, from her head, shortening the long face and humanising it.

"I didn't think you and Martha would want a crowd round you, so I haven't troubled to dress." She came slowly towards him.

"Mother and father are up."

"Oh, are they?" She nodded her head, laughing. "Poor Owen!"

Martha was more and more teaching him to

regard people as separate entities, with a possible bad capacity or a possible good capacity towards him, instead of lumping them all together in his mind as useless, and retiring into himself away from them, as he had got into the habit of doing. He suddenly detached Mary from his family and considered her as a possible ally, a possible different being from the old pair who irked him so. . . . She had understood that he wanted to slip out with his love into the morning, alone and unwatched. What a little, thin flower of a thing she looked in the long white nightdress!

"Mary, you're a brick," he said, his heart warm to her. He put out his hand, then, on impulse, drew her up close, put both arms round her and hugged her, gently, careful of her little, young, tender breasts. His kiss landed on the parting of the hair, soft as cat fur to his face. When he let her go they were both embarrassed and a little breathless.

"Good luck, O."

He hurried downstairs.

II

"Owen, dear. There's just something. How can she be twenty-one here when five years ago you made her only fifteen?"

"Oh, damn blast!"

They sat, after all, not on the front lawn, because of the wind, but in the shelter of the woodstack and the solid gorse behind it, before and beneath them the thick, fluffy pile of the oblong black carpet that was the Cathedral Woods. Over them floated the nutty sweetness of the gorse, smells of wet logs, earthy and sour like a funeral wreath, the heavenly wood smoke: for Martha the good and endearing sea-smell of Owen's sweater pressed up against her. They had tramped since breakfast, eight sticky, squelching Sussex miles: past Petteridge's, over the Mysterious Bridge where the ghost was said to appear, through a dozen pasture gates where the deep black mud, hoof-marked and rutted, caught and pulled, wheezing, at their feet, right across the valley to Pippering Ighe, where the kennels were, and back again through the Ighe woods. Clearing was going on there and Martha sighed for a basket to carry home some of the clean dry chips with which the ground was nobbled: just the size for Owen's big cottage grate. . . . Martha, proud of her aching body, but tired of it, would have liked to go to sleep in their gorse nest, but she had not the heart to refuse Owen: he was so eager and shy over his bundles of manuscript, and he had had such a

job, bringing them out intact through the worrying breeze. . . . Owen hated reading his own work. He was no long-haired elocutionist! and his best bits sounded bald and flat without the dashes, dots, and exclamation marks which gave them life on paper. He had, however, done his best, even been carried away a little, longing for the slow flush, the quickened breath that would betray her thrilled—and now! her only comment—and that an interruption of one of his most heart-stirring passages——

"I beg your pardon, dear! But, don't you see, this is only a rough-out, the bare skeleton of the business, really. Little details like that come later."

"A skeleton ought to have all its bones correct," Martha insisted.

Owen controlled himself. "Skeleton was the wrong word. What I've read to you really amounts to the bare spirit of the thing. The emotion I'm going to dress up my plot with afterwards . . . the stuff that pours out of you and must be set down at once, or you've lost it. Facts and points of grammar don't pour, you fit 'em in afterwards.

"I set out your way, getting every little cut-and-dried detail put down as I went along, but it wasn't

any good. If you give that red-hot stuff a second to cool off——"

"Yes, I do understand that. But I thought that was why people laugh at the lady novelist—she isn't particular enough about her facts."

He said patiently: "I shall be. Don't you worry." But he thought: "She thinks I don't know my craft. *She* doesn't believe in me any more than the rest. . . . Criticism is a very deadly weapon: easily capable of manslaughter: adept at crippling for life. For life and love and liberty a man may do without, but work is his answer to the universal riddle."

Martha was humming the *Chocolate Soldier* under her breath.

"Martha! You do like it, don't you? A little bit?"

Her response was always sure and warm. "My darling, I do. I do like it! I think bits of it are wonderful."

He put the manuscript away under a stone, and turned with sigh to the love that was real from the appreciation that was not.

III

Their honeymoon was a safe subject.

"I should like to be married very early on a June morning—is it before or after three one has

to get married?—and rush away with you here directly afterwards, and spend a whole summer lazing with you in these woods, these fields, these gardens. With Hannah to 'do for us.' Hannah couldn't spoil romance."

"I should like," said Martha unexpectedly, "to be married in a November fog and walk away out of it with you into the south sun somewhere—or perhaps into real winter, Switzerland, you know, right up high. I've always longed to travel."

The "with you" precluded any sense of offence, of course.

"That's the beauty of my work: we *could* travel." He hated himself for thus trying to tempt her into approval. "I can do it, like Ann Veronica, sitting over a pail of whitewash, or I can do it on the high Himalayas. We could go to all these places afterwards—if I made any hit."

She sat bolt upright at that and turned towards him with something of excitement, something of determination, something of apprehension too, in her manner.

"That's just it! Now we've come to the subject. . . . I've been meaning to talk to you about this, Owen, when do you suppose we'll be able to be married?"

Sitting up to meet her he rested his whole weight on a dead gorse shoot.

"Cor—ruption! Martha, dear, you can't marry on seventy quid a year."

"I know that. . . . How soon will this be finished?" She fingered a corner of the thin sheets, dry clay from their pebble-weight coming away between her fingers.

"Well, I've slacked a bit lately, of course. Three months ought to do it."

"Three months!"

He said, red-faced but dignified: "I can't flog my brains as Petteridge does his plough-teams."

"And then?"

"Then it goes to the publishers, of course. They may keep it another three months."

"But if it is not accepted?"

"Oh, Martha *dear*——"

She resisted his arm, strangely, and said, looking straight: "Owen, I'm twenty-five years old in September. What's a boy's age to you is a failure's age to me. I'm not young enough for the sort of waiting it's going to mean."

He thought she was pitiful, and, holding her against his shoulder, crooned to her little endearing names, fragments of comfort and adoration. Her

ordinary voice broke out into it, hard and scattering.

"I do mean it, Owen."

"What do you mean?"

His voice, hard as hers now, gave the harsher words to her tongue.

"That I'm not prepared to take that risk—the risk of your failing at the end. No girl minds being asked to wait for something tangible, something definite at the end of it all. But this hanging about on failure—it's too much to expect."

He had strongly the fatal sense of rôle which makes mild quarrels into dangerous ones. He did not want to say it, he did not for a moment believe it, his ill-temper was not even properly aroused: only that wretched feeling for climax brought out the question.

"Are you asking me to release you?"

"You know I'm not."

"What then? . . . Are you asking me to give up writing?"

Martha struggled suddenly and unsuspectedly with tears. "I'm asking you to give me something definite and near to look forward to. . . . I'm asking you to make your father happy by taking the generous offer he's made you, as any decent

son would . . . as any *man* would who's taken the responsibility of a girl's happiness on his shoulders."

"Oh, so you've been talking to him!"

A blind rage and disgust filled him, boiled furiously in his very entrails. His Martha! his find, his God-sent mate, who had come to him giving her spur, her clear, young wild comprehension, turned against him with the others, after all. Her letters were a pretence. She was a pretence. The wild moments at the foot of Chipcot were a pretence. After it all, she belonged to his family and to all that from which, since childhood, he had wanted to be free.

"Don't you know it's wicked to kill a man's ambition?"

"I'm not killing it. I'm trying to rouse it."

"You'll never rouse it for that."

She said, in her cold way that was the most exquisite counter-irritant to his rages: "No, I'll never rouse it for anything. . . . I know your type better than I know most. My father's life was ruined over just such a bigot's theory. He wouldn't do what other people knew was best for him, either." She wanted to say: "What other people knew he was fit for," but dared not.

"How ridiculously you exaggerate. Ruined!"

"Well, it killed my mother, anyway. D'you suppose I want to know a repetition of that?"

Silence fell cool on their heated, rushing minds.

Martha, coming out of angry visions, suddenly became aware of a miserable Owen picking over, with listless fingers and eyes that saw not, his little bundle of manuscript, still floured by the yellow clay grains. She saw with anguish his dreary eyes, the unconscious forlornness of his big body. The cold rancour in her broke.

"Owen . . . My poor!"

She held all that she could of him in her arms, the dead weight of his long legs pulling on her, this way and that, as she swayed and strained. Her breast ached with little runnels of sharp feeling, sharp and frantically sweet.

"It was cruel and wicked of me to ask you to give it up, I can wait, you'll see. . . . I *want* you to do the work you love."

"As if anything mattered but having you!"

Their little ecstasy of wrangling ended at last in a compromise. Owen was to finish his book and try his luck with it. If it was accepted they would wait and see. . . . If it was not, he would accept his father's offer and give up all idea of writing save in his leisure.

"Which means the same thing," said Owen in

his heart. But there was Martha, warm and reconciled beside him.

The book was finished in less than two months. In the course of three more it was refused by four good houses: one outsider offered to put it on the market if Owen would put £80 towards the costs. . . . At the beginning of January Owen had abandoned the cottage, returned to Harmsworth House and definitely commenced his career as a prosperous East India merchant.

CHAPTER X

I

THEY were married, as Owen had wished, in June of that year.

Young Gawne looked forward to his marriage with an intensity of eagerness that had in it other elements, and greater, than his natural longing. With some justification, he meant it to console him for a very real sacrifice. Alone, of all of them, he still believed that he was capable of writing a successful novel: he knew that his work had been killed by haste, by over-eagerness, by foolish shyness of a criticism he ought not to have allowed to worry him. A publisher had spoken well of his opening chapters. . . . He had, after all, given up his life's interest for his love, and love should recompense him. In some ways the activity into which he was thrown was a relief from the dreary waiting about of past months.

He had no time for heartache: Martha claimed all his leisure, and Martha was perfect. Whatever grudge he had against her, he could not bring

the unpardonable one that she traded on his defeat. Since their quarrel, and through it all, she had remained the same: no more aloof while her wish hung on windle straws, no sweeter when it was gained. That last mistake was reserved for his home, where Owen played the rôle of prodigal son till his heart sickened. But William's word was good. The "marrying salary" was forthcoming in a few months, and by wild-rose time they were speeding south in their honeymooners' reserved coupè, Devonshire bound. Owen had given up the idea of a Chipcot honeymoon with an ease which surprised Martha, and although they could not afford to go out of England her first alternative suggestion has been affectionately approved. Owen was coming along. Sussex, once his love and his high horse, rarely crossed their conversation nowadays. He never spoke of the cottage and he had himself put aside the thought of living at Harmsworth House after their marriage. They had, after some hesitation, negotiated for a passable little dwelling on Richmond Hill.

From all that she could hear, he seemed to be doing well and enthusiastically with his work.

Martha was perfect.

They droned through the lush Somerset, field and pasture, pasture and field: the ragged hedges

were kaleidoscopic with June flower, and Martha dragged them all with ecstasy into her greedy vision.

"Owen—look! Marguerites! Oh, what a sight!"

The cockney in her bloomed out suddenly, bright and headlong and rank.

"Shall I stop the train for you to get out and pick them."

"No, I want to get there. . . . Owen, there *is* country in England besides Sussex, isn't there?"

He quoted, smiling, "Each to his choice, and I rejoice——"

"Meaning me?" She was almost arch: it was very unlike Martha to be arch. He put it down to panic, the ecstatic dread in panic that was at work in himself underneath his calm and smiling attitude of reassurance, rending his stomach dreadfully . . .

They had an interminable wait in the holiday swelter at Taunton, and another in the train at Barnstaple, people rushing up with eager, relieved faces to their locked carriage, falling slowly back with resentful, fallen faces when they saw the red label on the windows.

"Oughtn't to *have* reserved carriages this time of year."

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"Money duzz everything on this line."

Owen was the wearier of the two when at last they drove out through Braunton on their final five-mile stage, in the high country gig, very insecure with its low barsides, and the wooden, uneven wheels painfully harsh and gritty to their tired senses. North Devon, in colourless dusk, did not seem very much more exciting than any other county. They had prattled to each other of lanes that were really deep red ravines, of rich combes, tunnels of greenness and lush bloom, with a glittering blue jewel at the end of the tunnel, of everywhere a foreign, exotic, unfamiliarity of flower and shrub and fern. Martha would not have been surprised to see cactuses growing in the hedges. But there was no red earth and no tropical vegetation, and when they looked round and thought, excited: "We are in Devonshire!" they saw stretching around them the plain fields, treeless, moth-eaten pasturage. . . .

"South Devon's lovely, I believe," said Owen, kind to Martha's fallen prestige, "but fearfully hot. I've heard Torquay has palm trees growing all down the middle of the High Street, anyway."

They welcomed the dead waxen scab of Saunton Sands as they breasted the highest point of the hill: their eyes tumbling down from cliff to green

cliff to rest on that blind whiteness, blending almost inperceptibly into the pale sea and broken only at last by Barnstaple, black and bitty, smelly even at that distance.

"Miles of it," Owen gauged. "We'll walk over there one day when we've got lots of guts. Looks as if there might be quicksands."

Croyde came astonishingly quickly after that, so that it seemed they had spent all the time moiling and humping themselves up to that view of Saunton, and thence dropped, swiftly as if in a quick lift, into their little house at the very edge and kingdom of the sea.

II

After eggs, and tea, and custard, and stewed fruit (Martha prayerfully heralded cream with every course, but she had to fall back upon South Devon again) Owen's stomach became agonising, not of the food he had eaten, but of the apprehension that consumed him.

Martha said he should go out and explore the domain and smoke, while she unpacked and licked the landlady into shape. She would join him in half an hour at the most.

Martha was perfect.

Martha was either a surprising good actress or deuced calm.

Their garden was brought to an end by the beach itself, and Owen, as he shuffled across the dry, scurfy seaside grass, could hear the high tide flapping against the wall with a hollow noise like wood blocks flying about, and the long grate of each returning wave: if he had gone down the steps and out of the little beach gate he would have walked straight into two feet of ocean. He sat down, instead, on the third step, reminded, by the damp wall rising high and close above him on either side, of the little lock at Teddington, where Martha and he had taken a skiff out after house hunting one spring day. They called it Golgotha, place of a skull. The long line of lights hanging in the outer darkness before him, irregularly, like dots on a fever chart, must be Lundy Island: Lundy Isle, in mouth of Bristol Channel, S.W., coast England, 2½ m. long by 1 m. wide (45 m. to Irish Sea). Martha had looked it up in Pears Encyclopædia before they came. She was always very keen on the history, topography, and geography of any place she was about to visit. She had followed their route coming down by the map in the Great Western coupè with delight. Martha was a quaint mixture of childishness and a grave,

aloof, and reserved maturity which he would never reach. . . . He was married to Martha. He took a long breath above his cigarette, of the night air, cooling his tongue against it. Marriage was a good thing. Average people, of which the world is composed, could not expect to keep abreast of each other very long, because human nature is progress. Marriage would keep them together despite themselves, mutually making the best of what could not be helped, and in time the thought of change would automatically become repugnant. Elderly, married people, however incompatible, did not yearn for all the upset of a separation. People should remember this when they abused marriage; no prison-house, but the only safe asylum for all those muddles and mistakes brought about by the wonderful, eternal novelty of human reproduction. . . . He could not, either, imagine taking Martha any-other way than in marriage.

In a few moments she would come to him, shy at last, and trembling, and he would put his arm with brotherly tenderness around her, soothe her, make her laugh, turn her thoughts to the good wholesome tomorrow before them. A man had more in his hands, to make or mar, on his marriage day, than most men

dreamed; perhaps than most women, even, could know or tell.

Her voice hailed him from the window at last.

"Owen!"

He flung away his cigarette into the water. The clear cut, tiny explosion of the lighted stump meeting an oncoming wave stung in his ear.

"Mrs. Hammel wants to know what we'll have for breakfast. What about you?"

"Oh, anything."

"Well, you can have anything you like."

"Oh, eggs," he shouted back, at random.

"Eggs it is." She put out her head again to say: "I'm coming in a minute; are you getting cross?"

"Bloodthirsty!"

"Poor old soul." Owen could sense, and faintly resent, in her low chuckle, the note of amused affection, certainty, gentle tolerance, that grows with years, lichen-wise, over happy women's passion. It was much colder, when at last she came out, and she made him move up to the top step because the dark walls hemming them about made her feel creepy. They sat, silent and chilly, with the sense of loneliness, of foreboding, that *the first night* in a strange place can give. The

long, cross-country journey had taken its toll of both.

"We might have stayed in London for a night," Martha said, presently.

Owen reflected. "That's a dreary business, too. . . . If I'd been really prosperous, we'd have had a decent car to take us down."

"You'll have that one day, I hope."

He said, gravely: "Whether you will attain great prosperity or not depends upon your capacity for being interested."

"Your capacity for hard work!"

"That's the same thing. . . . You needn't be afraid, my dear, we won't starve. But I've often thought it's worth while being poor for the wonder of riches."

"Oh, Owen!"

He laughed, indulgent, and drew her up nearer. "Horrible revelations on eve of marriage! . . . Martha, dear——"

"What?"

"——"

His little, impotent grunt, that reminded her fantastically of a straining gate, touched and woke her. It was her charm and her despair that she must always be wakened again and afresh.

"I'm going to slip up now," she said, soon.

Her lips, when she kissed him, did not tremble; they were strong and rich, like his own.

. . . . . .

Beauty worked in him like a spell.

"You're so exquisite," he would cry, wrung with it.

"Am I?" He knew she was smiling, serenely and soothingly, in the darkness. "I wonder what makes you think so?"

"I don't mean what you look like, what you feel like. . . . It's the you, the woman you are, the mother you are—the something in you that goes over and past me. I don't know what it is. You hurt me."

She could not understand how she hurt him.

. . . . . .

In the morning she wanted to get up when she woke and go exploring in the early, cool sunlight.

"Martha! I've been awake for ages waiting for you to wake. Can't you stay a little while beside me?"

"But this is the best time of the day! I thought you liked to be out in the early morning. . . . Look at the sky, Owen! It's cornflower blue."

"I've always considered myself a fairly whole-

some sort of chap," he said, as he slipped off the blankets. "It's queer how you have a knack of making one feel exotic."

Her childish streak came out again, strong and irritatingly charming, when they found cowries among the tiny beaches cast up in between that long, savage line of rocks which stretched away to their left and made the bay one of the most dangerous for bathers on the coast.

CHAPTER XI

I

ALL honeymoons, being marriage presented in an unreal form, have an atmosphere of unreality about them. Values are dimmed, issues waived or evaded; a mental short-sightedness sets in which after-life can never repeat, and renders such a period of undistracted two-ness possible and even roseate. Martha and Owen, presented with an entirely new set of emotions and experiences, constructed from them each a new and unreal self, and these two poor ghosts of a day and a night's passion clung to each other with joy and pride in their ghostly souls, and with relief. . . . They explored the coast in all directions; Saunton, their leaden feet sinking inches deep into the spongy white sand at every step; Barnstaple, odorous and rowdy; Croyde proper; lovely Woolacombe, balm to Martha's disappointed heart, where they rode absurdly on hired beach ponies, Martha's a faded and embittered imitation of a bucking Western broncho, Owen's a long-shanked bathing-machine

throw-out, that pursued its ambling gait at a set course along the rim of the water, and refused at all costs to come anywhere near Martha, flopping and prancing in the far distance. Martha shed delight at everything. She joined without a flaw in Owen's ecstasy when they found at Westward Ho, Kipling's "wuzzy," and could recognise the Pebbleridge where Stalky and McTurk had bathed. She went little excursions of her own into Croyde village, and brought Owen back terrible chocolate, which she poked into his mouth and held it, like a dog's, until he had swallowed it. She wore old, uncared-for clothes, and left off keeping him waiting while she hatted or coated to go out. . . . At night she made indescribable cradles for him with her arms, and held his face hid for hours in the warm intangibility of her throat and breast, and, suddenly, at the merest caress, gave him the flaming response that never failed to shake him to the bottom of his unsuspecting soul.

Richmond changed all that in the twinkling of an eye.

II

"Owen!"

"Well? . . . I say, Mrs. Gawne, like some Eau-de-Cologne?"

"Oh, Owen! Is it bad? it's too much, that's the

third time in a fortnight. I'm afraid there isn't another either."

"Never mind. I'll finish up with toast."

"I'll tell Ellen to warm you some of the fish."

"No, no, it's all right."

"There's a cold sausage or two in the larder."

"No thanks, dear."

"Owen, you must have *something*. I'll get you the sardines."

"I tell you I *don't want* anything."

"Oh, very well. Owen, you ought to be home early this evening."

"Why? I can't. I've got a handicap with Birrell."

"Oh, Owen, you *must*. The Chubbs are coming to dinner, and that man Reath."

"Oh, God!"

"Owen!"

"Reath's a fearful outsider and Chubb guggles his soup. And anyhow, I'm booked up."

"It's nonsense to talk like that. I wish you'd take a proper view of your responsibilities. You say you want the contract and then you put off a splendid chance of putting in a word, for a golf match."

"Is that why you asked them down here?"

"Of course."

"Oh, all right. Only I wish you'd consult me first, sometimes."

"It wouldn't be any better. . . . We must keep up with these people, Owen."

"Of course."

In his heart he groaned. "Oh, God, she's making me a good wife!"

Owen's affairs were prospering. In the six years since his marriage he had doubled his income and rejoiced his father's heart. William Gawne, without making any sign, meant in a year or so, if all continued to go well, to retire and leave his share of the business in the hands of his son. The long journeys to and from town were getting too much for him, and Nancy, ailing with heart trouble, needed careful watching. Mary was in business in Hastings. . . . Owen worked hard and conscientiously at his business, but he worked like a man in a dream. His thoughts were always away, Martha complained, but she never could make up her mind exactly where. He wrote nothing now, and read very little. Golf, his one recreation, took him away from the house a good deal, but even she could see that it did not claim him. And she suspected, too, that he only did it as a counterstroke to her social instincts which he hated.

Everybody said what a good wife Martha was to Owen Gawne. They had moved from their first house on the Hill some years ago, and taken something more pretentious, nearer the gates of the Park, and there Martha entertained all the people she thought useful or likely to be useful to her husband in his career; there she made Owen bring his few city friends, there the pillars of Gawne, Gawne and Linlith found a niche, and the local mayors and councillors caught a glimpse of something bigger than their own strutting little successes, in the bright, roving, gleaming eyes of their hostess. . . . They had all seen Owen start and wake under that eye, sighing, like a man turning to take up once more some distasteful task.

"Queer, sleepy chap, Gawne," little Chubb reflected over his noisy cigar, in the gloomy courtyard of the New Station. "Doesn't look what he is, some'ow."

"It's the wife," Reath thought.

"Yep. She's up to everything."

III

Their private life, Owen sometimes thought, was as dreary and disappointing as all the rest; more so, because he set more store by it. Robbed

of the spur and interest of working which his writing had used to give him, he turned more and more for an absorption to the life of the body, trying, too, to empty into it his purposeless spirit as well, as if he would create of it all, somehow, at least one aspect of life into which his wasted emotions and energies might be absorbed. And Martha, less than any woman in the world, could help him to what he needed. After the first flush and tenderness of marriage she had become classified in her emotions to an extent which nearly drove him crazy. Passion, the bodily life, was one thing; everyday affection was another, tenderness in illness or sorrow had also its place, but if the passionate love Owen laboured under and craved for did not come within her horizon, she did not know it. She was at first unhappy and full of compunction, because, not understanding what it was, she could not seem to give him what he needed, then irritated, because he was never satisfied, finally rather disgusted. He ought, she said, to be able to keep things separate. . . . The very fire and flare of response in her that had used to be his glory, waged against her now. She knew nothing but that, and sleepy, contented, motherly quiescence. The man would lie beside her in quiet night hours, wrung and sweating with the

agony of beauty perceived, of beauty that could not perceive itself; that was his torment; the beauty and wonder of her that she could not see; and that neither passion nor possession could blur for him, the ache of it. . . .

Well, at least she had the grace of stillness under caress. She never fiddled with hair or face, or patted him or stroked; she lay quite passive, or only moving to crook his limbs into comfort, which she could do to perfection.

Her capacity for getting up punctually to the gong in the morning was a thing of terror and a blot for ever.

IV

Martha stood before her dressing-table in the sharp, concentrated March sunlight, dealing with wrinkles. She never allowed her body to get slack or ill-cared for. Just as much as her brain it was needed in the campaign for Owen's success. It has gained with years; youthful boyishness falling away from it gave the slight accentuation of sex that suited so well her dark warm beauty; the waistline begun to be defined, the arms and throat faintly voluptuous, dignity acquired. . . . She could hear her husband singing in his dressing-room, a low grunting murmur that rose through

humming to his careless, tuneless carol, as he became absorbed in the details of toilette:

"Sailing, sailing, over the Coltsfoot Rocks,
There's many a man can change his shirt!
And none can change his socks."

and:

"'Is it weakness of intellect, birdie?' I cried,
'Or a rather tough worm in your liddle inside?'
'Tiddly-i-tiddle-i-tiddy-i,' he replied—
'Tit willow, tit willow, tit willow!!'"

He never could remember half the words, and he hadn't a note of music in his head, but his warblings couldn't disturb her.

"Owen!"

He came, rather meringue-like about the face with the thick lather, soapy brush in hand.

"Bully stick, my dear. You might order some more, while you can get them."

"Oh, they've plenty. . . . There was something I wanted to discuss with you before I go down. It's a case of making a good many arrangements, you see, and if you're going soon to Birmingham——"

She was strangely restless and shy at coming to the point, picking at the cover in a shifty, nervous

way. It gave him the unusual feeling of being bigger and stronger than she.

"Well, old honey-pot, fire ahead!"

"Owen, I think we ought to have a child."

"My dear!" He was touched and tender, embarrassed, too, by the daylight which seemed incongruous to it and by the soap on his face, making any sort of appropriate caress ridiculously impossible.

"You don't mind?"

"Mind! I've often wondered why you never wanted one before."

"Well, I haven't really had time to attend to that sort of thing. . . . You had to come first."

His eyes were suddenly opened to a side of her that he had never known, or had passed by, giving it a false name. Under her driving and goading of him lay this pathetic sense of service, toiling for him, moiling for him, allowing nothing, not even his stupid resentments, to turn it aside from its goal which was his welfare, his success, so far as she could see, his happiness.

"You poor dear old soul! I've been pretty selfish and ungrateful, all without realising it."

Smiling at him, she said: "I led you into it, you see. I was bound to see you make good. But

now; you're well on the road. . . . About April or May would be the best, Owen."

"Of course, anyway you like."

"It's ever so much easier to have them young like that in the summer, you see."

"I understand . . . Martha—dear——"

"Well?" She twisted up the thick, dry hair with a deft movement and glanced at the coil in the glass, her back turned to him.

"Oh, nothing."

He went back into the dressing-room slowly, his pulses quickly steadied. After six years of marriage a child was, after all, nothing so wonderful of course. Still, even now, he could have adored her for wishing it. . . . The first excitement dying, he saw fatherhood on a level, the dead level of his husbandry for these last five unresponsive years. It had come too late. Something in him that would have been the instinct and emotion of fathering had perished through disuse. He thought past the quivering, wondering moments, the bundle of blanket and pink ugliness lying, weightless, in his suddenly colossal arms, out into the soberer absorption of a little, unbudding Owen, coming to him for sympathy from the sternly practical Martha. . . . Martha's baby, of course, allowed into the world at last, now that

prosperity was assured, for its parents, in April or May. Loneliness spread round him like a cloud. A child arranged for so calmly would be Martha's child, never his.

One more of life's possible epics, translated into Marthaic, became meaningless and unreadable for Owen.

V

He had acquired a dog, a lovely thing of black and tan and leaping intelligence, governed by one tail, two pansy eyes, and a short, bunched body that became possessed of devils when he looked or spoke, a mere skinful of proud, galvanized, erupting emotions. Owen would take its head on his knee when Martha was not by, gently massaging the thick, soft lips, and whispering to it over and over the famous parody.

"Terrier in my granny's hall;
I whistle you out of my granny's,
Hold you, tail and all, in my hand
Little terrier, and if I could understand
What you are, tail and all,
And all in all,
I should know what black and tan is!"

"My lovely dog! Got a hot nosie, then?"'
Martha it treated with a bland indifference. It

had eyes for no one but Owen, and he, delighted, though outwardly scoffing, privately fostered the attitude. In time he induced the authorities to allow this chaste animal on the golf course with him, and it would follow him round, sometimes, owing to a disposition towards canker in the ear, with its head hideously engulfed in one of Martha's old combination sleeves, staid and aloof and gravely critical of his strokes, his partners, the time he took over his drives, his lost balls. It never attempted to help him look for these, but would wait, tolerantly patient, in the rough till he returned.

Sometimes they forsook the course for Richmond Park, and then its whole nature changed; it became a youngling, elfishly intrigued by the possibilities of ponds, of tall bracken, of muddy roads, and red deer.

Martha suffered it sourly.

"Now just look here, Owen!"

She showed him wet, fresh pawmarks on the white and black diamond flags of the hall, on the dining-room linoleum.

"And here!"

A long scratch across the white wall panelling.

"Your trousers are filthy!"

"It's frightfully wet out."

"Yes, you might have left the dog at home on such a morning."

"He must have his exercise as well as you or I."

"I spend all my time trying to keep your house decent, to make it pretty and habitable and a place to be proud of, and you spend all yours undoing my work. You might have lifted him across the hall; not you, you never think."

"And now to God the Father, God the Son——"

"There's no need for blasphemy, Owen."

"Or for such a sermon, Martha. A few foot-marks that can be washed off in a twinkling!"

"Who's going to wash them, pray?"

"Do I pay money to my servants to do the work of this house or do I not?" shouted Owen, nagged into fury.

"*I* look after the maids here and I won't have them called away from what they're doing at this time in the morning to clear up your dog's mess."

"Oh, blood!"

It was always the same. He had never been free in his own house since they entered it. Martha had taught him, with constant surveillance, much houselore; the real use of cushions, the proper destiny of tobacco ash, the function of a hall-mat, the little maxim of everything in its place. . . . The dog's coming had upset all her careful training

and made it necessary to start afresh. And Owen, never very placid, as he grew older grew less tractable in some things. She took to assuming a disapproving silence whenever the dog was in the room, expanded into monosyllabic replies when her husband spoke to her, and she covertly watched the animal's every movement. Owen could not stand up against that sort of thing. The terrier was consigned more and more to that kitchen oblivion which meant peace and harmony once more reigning above stairs.

In the summer he found a solace in the motor-cycling craze. It caught the club that year, beginning with a new member who had a sidecar outfit and made no secret of his pity for men who walked, clubs shouldered, weary miles to and from the course. The club, in reply, pointed out that they didn't carry their clubs, there was proper accommodation for these at the pavilion. Motor cycle retorted that he didn't care to have his clubs stolen or messed up by ambitious caddies, and he sometimes liked to clean them in the privacy of his own home. And there were such things as out matches.

Golfing men are the laziest in the whole world. It shames and crucifies them to have to carry so much as a letter to the post:

Birrell, in August, craving admiration, took Owen home one sweltering evening on his new twin, making huge strut over oiling up, adjusting well rusted-in nuts, flooding though no flooding was needed; he was well aware of the hypnotic envy in the untechnical Owen's eye, and he tried it to the utmost.

"Hi, something's on fire!" faltered Owen, suddenly aware of a long stream of blue smoke proceeding from them as they rushed forwards, and making gallant attempts to turn in his sheet-tin banana skin to ascertain its origin.

Birrell hawed. "On fire! Yes, the oil's on fire. Don't you worry old chap, leave it to me. You won't be erupted."

The speed, the stinging air on his face, the sense that this little nondescript Birrell had suddenly become invested with powers and knowledge beyond his ken, reminiscent of God, awakened things in Owen's soul which had lain a long time dead. He knew again energy, enthusiasm, the bullying desire for power which is the mainspring of men.

Birrell took the curbstone on his way out of George Street, caused a leggy gentleman to prefer the pavement with great suddenness and surprise, and forced a Council watering cart to pull aside for *him*, out of its sober course.

Even Martha could not object to a motor cycle. For some time yet she would be well enough to go out in the sidecar.

"Well, what d'you think of my little lot?" Birrell wanted to know. False—but incontrovertible—superiority radiated from him.

"Very nice—very jolly indeed. A handsome little lot."

"Of course, I couldn't show you anything like speed here. But she's *got* guts. You must come out to Leatherhead with me some week-end, Gawne. A splendid piece of surface there, and not so trap-ridden as the Portsmouth Road."

"That's very decent of you. I'd like it immensely."

"I've had a shocking lot of valve trouble. Burned out, you know, like fury, but I found my oil was all wrong. With O. H. V., you see——"

"Look here, Birrell. I rather thought . . . I had an idea of perhaps getting an outfit of my own before the end of the season——"

Birrell manifested an offensive surprise.

"You? Christ-opher Columbus! . . . Oh, good egg, old chap. What's the bus?"

"That's where I thought of asking your advice."

They discussed technicalities till lighting-up time, Owen showing up his ignorance wretchedly,

but clinging to his one saving point. He, too, would have a motor cycle, an appalling intricacy of iron, rust, and clatter, and would be God like the rest of them, powerful and full of strange knowledge. . . .

VI

He was happy again all that summer. He had not the truly mechanical mind, and at the club his machine was known as Griselda, because it was so much tried; Martha said he did his motor cycling in the garage and was rude when he invited her to come for a run: she had waited so often in the hall, muffled in her sidecar swaddling clothes, as she called them, while Griselda and her master wrought together and the sun sank. . . . But these things meant only the more occupation and interest for Owen. Man is really happy when he struggles with an inanimate thing which evades his will. It feeds his determination and restores his self-respect. He can bully it to his heart's content without the risk of immediate capitulation or a smack in the eye back. Owen took his full hire out of the patient but variable Griselda, and for a time she coloured his world. He became very technical in his speech, humorously so to suit Martha's level, grimly and desperately so among

the stultifying rivalry at the club. He took in a weekly technical journal, two thirds advertisements, one third incomprehensible diagrams and their still more incomprehensible explanatory matter: Martha liked these in the hall cupboard, Owen liked them almost anywhere else, and little civil wars became frequent. And also he began to suffer from a chronic, irritable indigestion. He was foolish to mention this to Martha: she was a remedy-craze woman, but he, on the other hand, was human and a man.

"You'll have to do something about that indigestion, Owen." She watched him one evening, happy with Robbialac and a mess and the fine, careless rapture of his overalls. The garage stank of petrol: it pinched her throat and smarted in her eyes. The glaring, naked bulb light swinging above his dirty face filled her with a tiny rage.

"Something wrong with my timing, eh, old pots? We'll just have to change the oil." He was so happy, he could not resist these inaccurate witticisms, which would not go down at the club, but Martha swallowed them wholesale, unquestioning. Bless her soul, she was sweetly a woman.

"It's because you don't get any exercise. Young Biss was asking why you never turned up at the

club now. And you've not answered about the debating society yet, Owen, I've been meaning to remind you."

"I can't stand up and mouth at people—

> "We won't have a Zenith Gradu-a,
> A Grad-u-a, a Grad-u-a,
> So just turn the handle and there you are,
> So we won't have a Zen-ith Grad-u-ah!

I'm not going to join any potty debating society, hum-hum-honey."

"You're letting yourself get frightfully rusty. And I never see anything of you nowadays."

"My duckie, you're always out somewhere."

"For you! You wouldn't come with me. . . ." She felt ridiculous tears rising, wet and soothing, above the bite of the spirit vapour. "What's the use of my cracking you up as I do to all these clever people? You never read, or write, or do anything worth while, now."

"I never write!"

"I didn't say only write. It sickens me, the way you waste your time in this messy hole."

He stood up straight, missing the light by an inch, and shouted at her. "You dare to tick me off about not writing! You who mocked and mur*dered my* work . . . You that humbled me be-

fore my father! You made me eat the filthiest humble pie . . . You that've choked my every living, decent instinct with your filthy smells of money, and held my nostrils in the lousy stuff for six years—twitting me I don't write! You—you *God*-eternal scold——"

His voice cracked, husky and high and hideous. Martha was hideous too, sickly pale under the colourless light, and starting little greasy drops of sweat. The Robbialac trickled slowly from his brush on to the bagged-out knees of his trousers.

Martha said, at last, squeezing the words tight out of her jerky breath: "Go on, why don't you go on and hit me?"

He knew *that* was an absurdity.

It was impossible, when she had gone, to go on calmly with his enamelling: it was as impossible to follow her into the house. The dust came down with awful quickness on the wet parts . . . He remembered, with shock and panic, the sweat, and Martha's horrible complexion under the rays of his naked bulb with its cheap, white saucer shade. The first three months were the potent and the tricky one.

Griselda, in her meek white wrappings of dust-sheet, became a feminine thing, a rival, upon which

Martha had turned the baleful eye of her sex-jealousy.

"She's got *you* walking, old doodle-do."

VII

At ten o'clock he went into the house, slinkingly, like a scolded child afraid to meet anybody, but, to his relief, Martha had gone to bed.

"Mrs. Gawne asked me to say she had a headache, sir, and she's taken aspiring. And if you'd like your bath tonight, sir, the water hasn't been used."

Owen loved hot baths, but the lukewarm affair that was left him after Martha's held few charms, and he adhered all the more readily to the cold morning tub which Martha affirmed to be man's portion. But tonight, his heart sore against her, he was ready to cavil against the hot water allotted him by a servant because his wife didn't want it. And his impregnable temper was past: he thought heavily of the cold looks and exquisite politeness waiting for him above: a form of war he couldn't stand up to.

But, thank God, Martha was asleep.

She had a way, in sleeping, of bringing her hands *out of the* clothes and laying them, palm upwards,

each side of her on the pillow: he had laughed at it often, remonstrating that she looked for all the world as if she had been laid out for her coffin. But tonight something in the helpless fingers, so potent for good or evil by day, so limp and harmless now, struck his heart to pain and pity. "Nothing but infinite pity is sufficient for the infinite pathos of life." Someone, to have had that kind, forgiving thought, had suffered with others even as he had suffered with Martha, and in some unsuspected moment such as this had come across in them that hidden, aching pathos which compels human beings to bear with one another despite themselves.

In his bath he watched his naked limbs, red-ringed where they left the water, hard and white and, when they worked, muscularly bulging as if something alive moved beneath the skin. Martha had always been thankful that he was not hairy. Hairy and blue-chinned men, she affirmed, were indubitably sensual. . . . In the next room, tightly sleeping in Martha's sleep, hidden now by the fair sweetness of her body, was something that might one day be these big, firm arms and legs: this stern white loveliness of a man's form. It was queer to think that out of Martha's fairness and softness and difference could come his own big, hard masculinity.

It was all wrong about babies, though. Man feels the coarseness of his own passion in the end more keenly than women, seeing less clearly the beauty of its ultimate fulfilment. Birth, he thought, should be elfin and unexpected: a real gift of God: some little spirit of dawn or dusk or darkness blown suddenly towards them and, as their hands closed round it, taking on their form and their materiate sweetness.

Chloroform and blankets and a fat, nasal nurse were wrong.

But he knew Martha would delight in all the lazy, lotus-eating of child-bearing: the tiny, vicious pulling at her breast, the beat of little, careless limbs about her body: long, placid days of bed and languorous ways and a little, soft, warm, noisy, proud thing hidden in the crook of her arm beneath the clothes. . . .

"Unto us a child is born: unto us a son is given."

He had heard that men always wanted daughters, but oh, how much, how desperately he wanted it to be a boy!

VIII

Later, he dreamt queerly, with terrific intensity, an odd jumble of motor cycles and babies *and Martha.*

His name was Clarence Stout and she was Psyche Obitubitch. He knew she was Psyche Obitubitch, though he called her Martha. The baby was with them in the sidecar—which was also a cradle—drinking milk out of his horn bulb. He had run the machine for five miles down Cheapside—he had no idea there was so much of Cheapside—avoiding traffic by miracles, and still she would not start. Someone had led the silencer up over the handlebars too, which made it very foggy just round his head and difficult to see anything in front. Strange noises issued from the engine from time to time. He asked Martha what she thought was the matter, and she replied at once: "Bluebottles in the silencer" (which seemed to him a very reasonable explanation).

The engine had started at last, and they rushed down Holborn at ninety miles an hour. Martha had lost her hat and become quite bald in the roaring gale. Owen was sorry, but powerless to prevent it: the speed was terrific and the handlebars grown so high that he could hardly reach them.

Piccadilly Circus. Apparently a show of motor cycles was being held there. It seemed strange to see nobody, only rows and rows of machines. . . .

They were not motor cycles after all, he found, but lawn-mowers.

"In that case," said Martha, with decision, tossing the baby into a lawn-mower hood as they swept round it, "we must get into Westminster Abbey at once."

So they went to Westminster Abbey: but just as they were about to run in through the Cloisters Big Ben struck fourteen and began to sing "God Save the King" in German, so they knew they were too late for the sermon.

Owen was shocked to find at that moment that he was rising in his bath costume: the muscles of his thighs bulged again as they had in the bath, but it was with emotion this time, because a policeman had hailed him for riding without lights—a harmless offence, it seemed, in broad daylight, but he knew it meant prison, and Martha standing by the policeman pointed at him with white sweating fingers and cried: "You've killed it, you've killed it: why don't you go on and kill me?"

He knew that he had hidden Martha's body under the garage floor, and moved Griselda over the place to hide the freshly-moved bricks.

It was a terrific drop. The hangman was swathed in dust-sheets, spattered all over with drops of Robbialac. Only his eyes showed, glowing.

Bump!

IX

Martha was awake. He knew it by her breathing and in some psychic way that never failed.

"Owen?"

She turned over and took him in her arms.

"I was a first-class devil," he muttered, crawling his face into some part of her warm, smooth, clinging flesh.

She laughed. He did not know it was her love laugh, he didn't hear the triumph and tenderness of love within. Rage, with its awful suddenness that he dreaded nowadays, was possessing him again.

"That's the sort of thing," he thought, furiously, "that's the sort of thing that blows love out of your soul."

Childishly, he turned and flung himself out of her embrace.

CHAPTER XII

I

"NANNA, you did say——"

"I said I'd ask your mamma, Master Tubby, and you heard what she said. Now, let that be the last of it."

"But I wanted to show him my fort."

"Well, then, you'll have to want."

"Oh, Nan—nar—r—r!"

"Now, Master Tubby, you're not to begin that grizzling and going on. Your father's a very busy man and when he comes home tired in the evenings he doesn't want to be bothered with little worriting boys like you."

"I'm not a little wudriting boy."

"No, you're a great big boy and much too old to go on in this way, growling and whining like an ninfant. You'll soon learn different when you go to school in September, I can tell you."

The sigh that came through the door seemed to the listening Owen as if it had been blown out of his own heart.

"Oh. It's very dispressing."

A little boy of five, especially if he be fat and endearing and hail-fellow-well-met, and as like his mother to look at as one pea is like another, can be a very dreadful thing to the man of thirty-eight who begot him.

Everything that a parent wants to happen can happen in the first five years of his child's life. That is the grabbing time: before the Church and the State and the round world can get a hold on him, you must make a snatch for that little body and brain, and write on them your name, on the baby flesh where it goes deep and easy, so that in the after years, just as deep and easy you will be able to read it among all the other names that are there.

If you have not snatched your little boy for yourself before he is five years old, he has gone past your hand for ever.

Something of this Owen John Allerton Gawne was realising as he stood on the wrong side of the nursery door and heard himself denied to his own son in terms of the money-making that he hated. More strongly than most parents, by reason of the disappointments of his life, Owen had the instinctive longing of parenthood to see itself resurrected and regenerated in its offspring. In the little

Tubby Owen's might-have-beens might live and come to fulfilment: like other fathers, but with a passion and tragedy unknown to other fathers, he saw in his child the possible attainment of all he had himself failed to attain. But Tubby was five years old and going to school in September, and must not worry his busy, money-making, terrible father. . . . He would have friends of his own, interests of his own, and an affectionate tolerance for the old guv'nor who let himself be sat on by mater and had worms in his head about poetry and mush. Thence he would go on to Eton, Harrow; the tolerance would slide into aggressive patience, and a wink at Martha: Cambridge, and he would be lost for ever in a young, huge world of his own, beneath which Owen would sit, funny and old and a nuisance, footing the bill. He would, naturally, expect to enter his father's splendid business. . . .

It was all Martha, of course. He could see how, in terror lest her son should inherit, or be infected by his father's unbusinesslike tendencies, she had kept Tubby away from him in the past two intelligent years, making his affairs the wonderfully natural excuse for all the world, and even, perhaps, half-consciously, for herself. "You heard *what your* mamma said. . . ."

These little, few weeks before September, this moment now, perhaps, was his only chance to make his son his own.

"Nannie, dear, listen to this story. Once upon a time there was an old *huge* ephelant and he lived in a sandwich box. I'm making this up myself, as I go on. He ears were like fans and he wore pearl earrings in them——"

"Nann-*ie!*"

"Oh be quiet, Master Tubby, do, I've something else to do than listen to your rubbish. Why don't you play quiet instead of chitter-chatter chitter-chatter all the time like you do? Where's your brickses and your fort?"

"I'm tired of my brickses and my fort— I want to tell someone my sto-ory——"

Owen's hand was on the knob. As he turned it there was a quick rush of skirts along the passage and Martha came, hatted, gloved, faultless.

"Tubby in there? What's he doing?"

"Yes. He's telling Nanna a story, I believe," said Owen, quietly.

"Oh dear, that silly game again! Why doesn't she keep him amused. It always means sitting up for hours with him at bedtime and then there's trouble in the morning." She swept past him into the room.

Owen walked slowly back to his own study, with desolation in his heart. He knew then that the only pain is dreariness and the only defeat lack of an interest in life. Tubby was Martha's. The house was Martha's, his own life was Martha's: God and the universe and eternity were Martha's, and he, Owen, sat alone among the desolation that remained.

The sharp, heart-stilling knock of the telegraph boy struck across his slow trailing into the hall: he halted instinctively, listening for the servant, and then opened the door himself. Cool air came in like water blown into the face: the boy's cheeks were rosy and he smelt of cold. The wire was almost certainly for Martha, but he must, of course, open it.

"Father very ill. Come at once. Mary."

He folded it up mechanically.

"No answer."

BOOK II

"And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word."

CHAPTER I

I

NANCY GAWNE survived her husband by about a quarter of an hour. It was as if her spirit passed when his passed and only the body, unknowing, lived on through the little interval. Owen was alone in the sickroom when William collapsed: he called the nurse and they did all they could, but he had bad news to break when he went downstairs at last, the dry air cutting cool and sharp inside his nostrils after the steam in the sickroom. They were all sitting at tea, but they had heard the hurry upstairs and they knew it was his watch for another hour yet. It looked like a photograph when he came in, all the faces turned expectantly his way, all the bodies motionless. He didn't know in the least what to say, but Mary jumped up.

"Owen, is anything wrong?"

He nodded slowly and mournfully, with raised eyebrows and lips compressed.

"Oh, my dear!"

Nobody knew who said that.

"Mother dearest——"

They all turned to little, frail, old Nancy. She sat far back in her chair, her hands were turned out on her lap, palms upward, her head lolled against the high bar, sending her cap awry with a carelessness that they could all see was not natural. As they looked she swallowed horribly, like an animal retching, and then lolled more than ever.

Martha got up quickly, emptying her cup into the slop-bowl. "She's fainted. Some water, Owen."

"It's her heart." Mary panted and rushed round to the chair. "She's an awful colour. Oh, fetch the nurse someone."

The nurse said: "Poor little soul," and made a note of the time.

The doctor would have to come, she said, but there wasn't any use fetching him in a hurry. They could all be sure it was quite painless, that was the mercy of these heart cases really. She'd rather go off with heart than most ways.

II

When she was a little girl, and thence well on *into* her teens, Mary used to suffer intervals of

conjecture, discontented imaginative intervals, when she would decide the type of woman she meant to be when she was grown up. There was the period of the stately dame with a presence, who brought men by her very aloofness to her feet, and left them there, either pretending to be, or actually unaware of this prostrate state of devotion. And there was the month of gay, privileged camaraderie, inspired by a performance Mary had witnessed at the Lyceum, of that thrilling romance *Under Two Flags*. For a long time she grew surely and steadily in the intellectual, well-balanced, gravely fine product of Girton and St. Hilda's, Ann-Veronica without her latter end, which did not appeal to Mary at that chaste age of all ages. The end of that, brought abruptly by a chance reference to blue-stockings, found her destined for a young suburban wife of the superior kind, pretty, witty, popular, standing just as high as her husband's heart and nicely qualified in all polite amusements, such as tennis, bridge, dancing, pianoforte accompanying, etc. . . . The game and the dream came to an end, but the habit of adjustment did not. With the same to-do and unconscious mental excitement she had to set her soul in order when she entered the business life: when Nancy grew frail and began to leave the

house-management to her: and now came the new existence with Martha and Owen, needing another entirely new Mary to fit. She had, of course, to adjust herself to several rôles: the honourable, but faintly patronised outsider, the brightening element in Owen's life, the feminine companionship that Martha might appreciate. . . .

Martha had been very good. Mary had been so devoted to his father and mother, Owen suggested, that it was unthinkable he should not make some sort of provision for her now: so far as money was concerned she inherited equally with himself, but a home and companionship were more to a single girl who had been used to both than any amount of money. He had sounded Mary on the subject and the idea of living alone revolted her. Would Martha consent to her making her home with them, at least provisionally?

"It's rather a lot to ask you, I know," he said, apologetically, "but—Mary's no child, but she isn't the temperament to set up on her own, d'you think?"

Martha was very bright and hearty. "My dear boy, there's nothing to bother me in Mary coming to live with us. She's a fairly cheerful body, isn't she? and we've plenty of room. Really, Owen, *I'm out* so much I'm afraid I shall hardly know

whether she's here or not: she'll have to understand that."

They had both forgotten her summing up of Mary and the averment of enmity between the two, years ago in the darkness of the pier at Hastings. Martha was by now about as sensitive as a coal-box to such little psychological disturbances, and Mary had her rôle. . . . Owen, with a sudden accession of grandfatherliness, had been all the more anxious to settle Mary under the steady shadow of his home because of a certain discovery he had made in some papers relating to her, directed to him in great privacy by his father. "I feel sure that you will respect your mother's and my earnest wish, that our little Mary shall never suspect any difference in herself from those around her," wrote William, with a sudden kindness of thought and tenderness which his son recognised in surprise. Owen pondered on the new and the strange, with the papers tumbled open before him. Difference? He supposed there was a difference, but what? He didn't look upon Mary with less respect because she was born out of wedlock. Mary herself didn't know, so neither shame nor fear could be hers, and what else? He wasn't much of a believer in this sins of the fathers business. Loose living meant disease and an inheri-

tance of disease, but the people who would suggest that Mary, born of passion, would live a slave to passion, were obscene of mind. Having a marriage service read over you couldn't make much difference. . . . There was too much talk about bastards and blood-taint and rubbish.

Inconsistently, he meant to keep Mary with them as long as he could.

The death of his father and mother, apart from the horror it carried, as all death at close quarters carries horror with it, did not affect him very deeply. His mind was in such a state of lassitude that it seemed incapable of any great reactions, and, besides, neither he nor Martha were close enough by now to the old people to suffer the sense of personal loss which is death's sharp sword. But Mary was bowled over for a time, and because he dreaded Martha to have a grievance he undertook the task of coaxing the girl back to a "cheerful body" with an energy he seldom displayed nowadays. There was something in her morbid state, too, which appealed to and was answered by his own. He was bound to save her from his own fate. The skinny black-clad body and the ringed eyes struck a pang in his heart when he saw them. And as if by instinct divining it, she would leave Martha, practi-

cal, busy, successful Martha, and come silently to his study, to pull his books over, or stare out of the window, or simply sit watching him at his work. Owen was very little at the office nowadays. Monday was his regular day, when he saw the machinery of his business put in motion for the week, but he preferred to do his work in the quiet and privacy of home, and the rest of the days seldom saw him anywhere else. Martha hated that arrangement, as she hated all his retiring instincts, but she couldn't interfere there, and she couldn't deny that their prosperity grew.

"I've got the telephone, my dear, and I can do more work in an hour quietly here without any interruption than I can in a day in that infernal meeting-place for bores and idiots. And young Handley's an A1. chap. Nothing'll go bust, my dear, you'll see."

Martha sighed and went her social round. More and more, as Owen once had thought to do before her, she began to concentrate all her hopes and dreams upon the small Tubby, schooling now, a little, proud, ridiculous bulge in knickerbockers.

. . .

Mary had got the crystal ball which he used to weight his papers, and was staring into it as if she were a clairvoyant.

"Seeing things?" He looked at her good-humouredly. "You ought to have a veil and a black curtain and tell me things to give me the creeps."

"I've got enough creeps of my own." She smiled. She was never irritating, or overdid the attitude: it was because she was so sane about them that her horrors were impressed upon you.

"Creeps? A kid like you? Wait till you're my age, you'll have something worth goose-flesh to think about then."

"You're not so very much older than me."

"Old enough." He sighed. "You're an awful kid, Mary, for all your long face."

She said presently, "It's an awful thing that people don't disappear when they die. Bodies oughtn't to be left about. When the vital thing goes, the homely things should go too. . . ."

"Don't think too much about death, little cousin."

"I'm *not* your little cousin, you know," she said, glancing at him.

"Near enough, Mary."

"You know really, of course, that I'm not anybody's cousin."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Your father must have told you I was a bastard."

He stared at the strange girl, furiously blushing.

"I knew in a dim way, before I came to them, that there was something wrong about me. It's easy to fit two and two together and guess what exactly."

"Father told me you had no idea," he exclaimed.

"Of course, they thought so. When I came to be old enough to understand—what was really the matter—I was old enough, too, to see how they were the kind whose hearts would break if they thought I had an inkling. But you and Martha are different. I had to be sure that you realised—who you were taking into your home."

He held out his hand to her, his face irradiated with compassion. "Mary dear, what nonsense! As if it would make anything near a difference."

She wouldn't take his hand.

"People won't allow *servants* of that kind in their houses. . . . You see, there's Tubby——"

"Don't talk such ridiculous idiocy!" He shouted at her, he was so upset. "One would think we'd never seen each other before! D'you suppose I want a *reference* from my foster sister?"

"People say the child always goes the same way," she murmured.

"My dear, that's all fallacy."

"D'you remember, Owen, how I wanted to stay the week-end with you at your cottage and mother wouldn't let me? There was a row about it. . . . Well, I've often wondered if *that* was why. . . . They hated my going to business, too."

He was overcome with pity for the thought how she must have lived, fearing with an ignorant child's fear of what it can only guess at, under the shadow of her knowledge. "My dear, *dear* little girl, you mustn't let yourself have these silly morbid ideas. I'm a man who's knocked about the world a good bit, Mary, and I tell you you've nothing to fear, nothing to worry about——"

Her thin shoulder, so unlike Martha's, under his hand, gave an odd jerk to his pity: moving it on to something beyond pity that was indefinable, but had in its ache a sweetness that the plain ache of pity does not hold.

III

The Berringtons were *bêtes noires* of Owen's. They dogged him at every step with their intellectuality, importuning him to share it. They talked him over with Martha, their willing ally, *and then* conspired afresh to drag him out of his

cosy, lazy retirement into their horrible activities. They made Richmond impossible to him: he might, he said, just as well have gone to Hampstead, with the Fabian Society next door and the Hyde Parkian At Home living all round him. Mrs. Berrington strove to combine a light, society manner with her scholarliness which drove him mad: she was so determined, with tooth and nail and every claw, not to be the conventional blue-stocking. Berrington was better, but he had no back to his head. . . . Owen had refused three times to attend their Debating Society, but they still persisted in sending him the jellygraphed notices of coming meetings. One had arrived this morning.

"Berringtons, Owen?" Martha looked at him across the tray. She had an unerring eye for unwelcome correspondence of his.

"Usual business, debate. I wish they'd leave me alone." But he knew she wouldn't let them.

Mary asked with her hand for the paper. "'The Trend of Modern Art.' They're ambitious. Where's it held?"

"At the Berringtons' house. They've sliding doors between the rooms. But it's quite a nobby affair really, all sorts of interesting people. That's why I *so* wish that Owen would go sometimes.

There's no necessity in the world for you to speak, not at first at any rate. It isn't very polite to Lena, Owen, when she keeps on sending you these notices."

"My dear, I might keep on sending invitations to the King to dine with me, but that wouldn't make it rude for him not to do so. . . . It's no good, you'll never make a public man of me, Mrs. Gawne. Better not wear yourself out trying." He smiled at her, a little doubtfully, and, meeting no answering smile, sighed and rose to go across to his study. Mary followed him out into the hall.

"Owen, I wish you'd go to that meeting."

He stopped and looked round at her over his shoulder. "Why? Do you want to go?"

"No, not particularly, but I wish you would."

"My dear Mary, what good would it do me? I couldn't speak and I don't know or care a bit about modern art or any other kind of art." In his heart he was thinking: "She's going Martha's way; now there will be two of them at it." But her answer was unexpected.

"Mustn't one do *something* to keep *cui bono* at bay?"

He swung right round and stared. "What do *you* know about *cui bono?*"

"Not very much yet, thank goodness. But it's a knack of coming on one unawares. We've all got to put up a defence ready in case."

"Hardly unawares." He looked grim.

"Well——? You've awful few friends, Owen."

"You don't think I'll be likely to find any in *that* lot, do you?"

She despaired, laughing: "Oh, Owen, you're hopeless."

He nearly said, "Pretty well that" but there was a flavour of disloyalty about thus parading his destitution before Mary. She was too sharp already by half.

"Well, I'll come, this once. But if I'm as bored as I expect to be, be it on your own head next morning, Mary. And mind, I'm not going to open my mouth."

"Oh, they'll all be so busy doing that, yours won't be missed," she assured him.

He thought very little more about it, but the following Monday, walking down the Strand to meet a business colleague at lunch, his eye was attracted by a group, so large as to be almost a small crowd, standing peering over and between each other's heads into a shop window. There was nothing remarkable about the appearance of the shop, and the silence and stillness of the gazers

was so striking that he loitered a moment to see what held them. His eye settled on the portrait of a lady in extreme déshabillé; her expression hovered between a smile so inviting as to be almost a wink, and a joyous horror at her own indiscretion; her legs were very long, silk-stockinged and shapely: pantomime legs, Owen imagined them.

"Ugh! Dirt."

He didn't like the feeling of being one of that silently staring, sense-absorbing crowd, and he was drawing out of it when the thought of the debate struck across his mind. "Modern art." Well, art. . . . But he looked closer at the many forms and reproductions of that sensuous little picture which had caught his eye, and even his untrained perception could see that they were a long way removed from the ordinary picture-postcard vulgarities. The limbs were exquisitely modelled, the poise of the figures was sweet and delicate beside being alluring, the colouring was more then exquisite, it was human. No vulgar, daubing pot-boiler could have reproduced so deftly the blue-black, threadbare appearance of the skin showing through the silk stocking: the reality of the hands, busy about garters and lingerie laces and powder-puffs: the elusive downiness of powder on the skin: the living hair. . . .

The names scrawled on the pictures conveyed nothing to him but a pity and contempt for those who had so debauched their skill.

A woman could have told him that it is just these little picture shops, little pits of sex and sense, with their eternal groups of silent, furtive onlookers, silently and furtively stirred, which gives to the Strand its quality of danger and sinisterness such as Piccadilly or Oxford Street does not convey.

He did think, as he walked on, that it was a sign either of the greater modesty of men, or of the imperviousness of women to these furtive sensual stirrings, that the artists did not set out to attract an audience of women by exhibiting men as young girls were exhibited, in every state of clothing and attitude that could be conceived to awaken the excitement of the other sex.

"I suppose that's one of the little results of the masculine government women are always carping at," he reflected. "Wonder women stand it. The *decent* ones."

IV

Mary came with him to the debate. He hadn't informed Martha till a day or so before of the change in his determination, and she was exceed-

ingly irritated because she had engagements for the evening which could not be broken. He felt that, secretly, she hoped he would speak, and secretly too, perhaps even to herself, she was annoyed that Mary and not she had been able to persuade him to go. But, for some obscure reason, on the fateful evening she was in love with him again, with one of those queer recurrences of emotion which married people suffer: he could see it in her eyes, the way she watched and looked at him, in the light, unnecessary touch on his shoulder, when she passed him on her way up to change. He thought it was because he was doing what she had so long urged him to do, and felt rather like the good boy. Martha, the last person in the world to analyse her own emotions, didn't think about it at all. Uncanny Mary, feeling the electricity in the atmosphere as plainly as they, knew that in some obscure way Martha's sudden revival of passion had to do with herself.

. . . . . .

The Berringtons' double room was admirably suited to the purpose. They sat in an oval extended throughout the two rooms, with Berrington and Mrs. Berrington and the lion of the evening, *B. A.* Battwell Lowe, one of the chief exhibitors

at the minor galleries that year, making a kind of Chairman's Bench at the head of the drawing-room, by the curtained French windows. Owen sat alone by the high dining-room sideboard, and every time he tipped his chair or sat back received a sharp blow upon the back of his head from the brass handle of a cupboard door. Mary was some way up, nearly next to Mrs. Berrington, who approved her long, thin, intellectual face and saw in her a possible addition. . . . Battwell Lowe was mercifully ordinary to look at, but he spoke in jerks, two or three words and a stop, which irritated Owen intensely, conjoined with the cupboard handle drilling into the back of his head. He was, as he had warned Mary, "as bored as he expected to be." They spoke in an obscure, exaggerated way which passed over his head, meaninglessly, and they gabbled off strings of names which were absolutely unfamiliar to him. Chiefly, he kept himself awake by thinking of Martha and conjecturing over her sudden obvious excitement over him, what it might mean when he got home. . . . A phrase of Battwell Lowe's, flashing past his ear, found its way in ". . . most of all we have to be thankful for, we have to be proud of, delicacy and purity of our modern art, a delicacy and purity which grows, which expands,

which becomes inclusive, which at last the public as well as ourselves is beginning to realise and appreciate."

Owen suddenly saw red. He did not know in the least whether Lowe was speaking of technique or subject-matter, he hadn't an idea of what the rest of the discourse had been about. What he thought, with horror and fury, was that this chop-tongued broomstick in perfect evening attire was giving his conceited thanks for the modesty and decency of modern art, when, in the shop windows of the Strand, women were shown undressing themselves naked to attract a filthy public into spending shillings and half-crowns on the easy possession of filth, to gloat over it in secret and safety in their own homes. . . . He became suddenly aware that he was going to speak. He waited, tense, while Battwell Lowe spat out the chips of his conclusion, and the rest of the company, in some psychological way realising that he was about to rise, also waited with tenseness for the end of Battwell Lowe. Most of them knew Owen by reputation, the alleged brainy chap who wouldn't come out of his shell. . . .

He stood up. Words glowed like red hot coals, furiously and innumerably in his brain.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Chairman" (that

was the wrong way round for a start, but he couldn't help it, he didn't care). "I came here, not intending to speak at all, but because I hoped to hear excuses made. I have heard no excuses. And I want to ask why. I want to know why all you critics and lookers-on" (he ignored Battwell Lowe magnificently) "are not down on your knees asking forgiveness of humanity for the atrocious rape of every decent, lovely human fact or thought or emotion, which the artist of today is committing. You say modern art is delicate, sincere, and pure. I say, what I have seen with my own eyes, that it is affected and insincere and debauched. The trend of modern art is a trend towards dirty utilitarianism and sexual obsenity." Mrs. Berrington winced; he knew she winced, not because she was shocked, but because she had her pose to preserve, and he went on, defiantly: "Sex and sexual allurement are being used as a catch penny today by the modern artist to a heartbreaking extent. And why? Because he knows, he's clever enough to know that's the only catch penny that'll never fail. And he's utilitarian enough to debauch art to produce that catch penny so long as a prurient public demands it." He looked at Mrs. Berrington as if deliberating upon what he could say that would most shock and convulse her

susceptible features, and finally concluded: "As a dispassionate onlooker, I cannot say whether modern art, as you call it, revolts or humiliates me most."

He sat down amid a storm of eyes. Mary met his rather bewildered gaze and made the faintest suggestion of clapping with her hands: her eyes shone and her face was flushed to the spirituelle beauty Martha had once accorded her. Battwell Lowe sat aghast: "I've let the wind out of *him*," thought Owen, hugging himself. A small man opposite who had not spoken before got up and began to talk of necessary breaking away from tradition, etc., and so the boiling effect of Owen's speech was reduced gently by degrees to a simmer, but there was no doubt that his short outburst was the mark of the evening. Lena Berrington's eyes held the faintly-frightened spark of admiration one accords to a strong but unconventional being, when she said good-bye to him. And Battwell Lowe avoided him murderously. . . . "What a horrible liar you are, Owen," said Mary on the way home, squeezing his arm affectionately. "Telling me you knew nothing about art."

"I don't, my dear, I don't know a thing."

"Oh, rubbish. Well, there'll be no excuses for *you now*."

Owen laughed and said nothing and hugged himself all the way along George Street and up the Vineyard. He had routed them all, he had shaken and astonished every one of them, and all over a Strand picture shop!

. . . . . .

"Owen spoke *splendidly*." Mary sounded the timbrels when they found Martha waiting in the study, back early from her dinner party. "He made them all sit up!"

"Owen spoke!"

"Right off my own bat, mamma, and shocked little Lena into the bargain. Now, don't ever say I'm not a credit to you any more."

Her obvious pride and delight over Mary's details all fitted in with his exalted mood, with the transient sense of power and admiration among men which was like strong wine to him. And ever and again Martha looked across at him with that recurrence of passion stronger than ever in her eyes. He sat back in his deep leather chair and felt the warmth of the fire on his skin: a beautiful fire, vivid yellow and red and black, leapingly alive as he liked it to be. He hated to come in to a dying fire. Exaltation filled him. He was glad that he had a fine house, that he had money, that

he had a wife. Martha was wearing her beautiful winter flannel nightdresses by now: he loved her in flannel: in some way it made her tender and protective and maternal and desirable beyond all things, and the fresh flannel smelt sweet. . . . Martha, despite all their differences, was a beautiful woman and his wife.

"Well, we might as well be getting up." He rose and held out his hand to Mary. Martha kissed her and went on out of the room, touching him almost entirely accidentally with her shoulder as she passed.

Ready to follow, he looked round at Mary with a smile. "Coming?"

There was that in her face as she looked after them that stopped, not only his feet, but the rushing exaltation within him as well: some quality of wistfulness, of faint envy. . . . He thought, suddenly, of Mary going to her cold, private bed, and compassion filled him.

"Good-night, little Mary."

He went right back into the room where she still stood, and kissed her.

But he wasn't prepared for the real shudder that went through her body as their two faces touched, a repulsion so great that it sent him stepping back away from her as definitely as if she had boxed

his ears. He stood, stupidly staring, at the absurd distance of a couple of yards from her, so surprised and hurt that he couldn't pull himself together to pass it off.

"I—I'm sorry, Mary."

She turned to him at once, as if some tension had been released in her, the old, ordinary, jolly Mary.

"My dear, there's nothing to be sorry about—I'm frightfully tired, that's all, Owen: I think I'll get up now." She passed him with the friendliest of smiles. "Nighty—nighty!"

As he lagged after her up the stairs, vaguely, ridiculously hurt and disappointed, and all his exaltation gone, he suddenly became aware, without the slightest room for doubt, that his new passion for Martha, and her new passion for him, and all the revivifying essence of the evening behind them, was in some extraordinary, incontrovertible way connected with Mary.

CHAPTER II

I

NOTHING that any one could say, Martha nor Mary nor the Berringtons, nor any one that was theirs, would induce Owen to speak again at the debates, or even to attend them. He knew his limitations all too well. Lena Berrington suspected him of a sense of anti-climax and respected him for it, though, with a tinge of malice, she did not cease to press him to follow up the sensation he had made. But the taste of power, of being "in things" again was like the offer of a forbidden drug to his mental ennui. Martha took his refusals to the Berringtons as final and resigned herself to looking upon the debate affair as a flash in the pan, but Mary knew better. She sensed his shyness, the conviction of being out of things for good and all, and against it the adverse craving to interest himself once more in literary affairs within the shelter of his home.

"Where are all your father's books?" she asked *him one* November evening.

"With the stored stuff. There wasn't room here."

"Owen, why haven't you got any books? There's hardly a printed page in the house, except Martha's posts and the weeklies."

"I haven't much time for reading, little cousin."

"Gr—r—r!"

"Can't read and biz at the same time. And I've got the golf, you see."

"Well, *I'm* bored stiff with never a word to lay my eyes on. I'll have to import some, or my brain will ossify."

She joined Mudies and the Times Book Club and left whichever book she wasn't reading about in his study. She was sure he read them, or at least dipped into them. But he wouldn't discuss them with her. She couldn't get past his shyness, his habit, his loyalty to that which had made him what he was instead of the bookish boy she remembered—whatever it was that kept him back from the old pursuits she knew in his heart he wanted. In desperation at last she conceived a plan.

"Owen!"

He put down his pen at once: he was always attentive to her few remarks. They sat alone in the study, encircled by the charm and warm cosi-

ness of early darkness kept at bay by a glowing fire. Owen's desk lamp made a tiny circle of light for his head and his hand to move in, but where she sat in the big chair there was not so much light as warmth about her, red and flickering. Martha was out as usual.

"What became of your book? Your own book?"

He looked at her, feeling as if he ought to wince.

"What on earth put that into your head?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've often wondered about it."

"More than I have," he said grimly. "I've tried to forget it."

"It wasn't as bad as all that, Owen."

"I don't know that it was bad at all. It wasn't so good as it might have been. But that wasn't why I've tried my hardest to forget I ever wrote it."

Mary had the sensation of a wireless operator when some long-delayed, long-expected message begins to come through. She leaned out to him and spoke softly, her lank silk shirt bunching out as her figure came forwards. "Why then, Owen?"

"*If one* can't have what one wants——"

"Put it out of your head. Yes, I know. But you're not too old to have it yet."

He sat silent, considering that.

"Yes," he decided at length. "I am. That's gone past me. That, and other things I've cared for —wanted to care for. . . . Such as my own son."

He hadn't meant to be as explicit as that, and he would not have been if he had not been so sure of the complete tact with which she would receive it. He was not disappointed.

"I've noticed about Tubby," she said, with a judicial, unsurprised air. "You *do* take very little notice of him, Owen?"

"He and his mother are going to be great pals. He doesn't need me—not yet, any way."

She couldn't gainsay that, if she did avoid his slight, wistful smile that said ever so much more than the words. While she was wondering what to say, he rose and came over and sat in the little upholstered chair, Martha's chair when she was there, opposite her, and leaned to her with a kind of gathering concentration, a resolution in his look, which made her heart thump horribly and sweetly.

"Mary, I've made an awful mess of my life." He was so earnest, she could see perfectly how, against his resolve, he had been sympathised into letting the flood go. . . . And he was so lovably

shy of playing the martyr, so sternly, transparently self-conscious.

"Wells speaks of people who can't exist except in relationship to other definite people. I'm, in a way, like that, but I think, if one has the instinct of writing, it takes the place of people, it does instead. . . . We all want something to pin our beautiful moments to, some centre to radiate life towards——"

She said, she was so quick: "I can understand that. Something to cut our æsthetic teeth upon."

"*You* ought to have been a poet, Mary. . . . Well, I think my writing was that much to me. Into it I could translate all the hurtful beauty of external things, sound, colour, great happiness. . . . You know, of course, what happened. While I was most keen and fit to do it, I had to give up writing temporarily, which meant giving it up for ever. I couldn't imagine myself doing anything of the kind now. . . . I haven't had an idea, Mary, I haven't had an impulse to take up my pen for five years. Not since Tubby came. And then, then one's work unfolded, without effort like petals. . . ."

She said, gravely: "The true writing instinct couldn't have been put off as easily as all that."

"You think so? You don't know"—he nearly

slipped out "Martha," but changed it in time to: "You don't know what criticism can do—when one's young and shy, with a living to make.

"Perhaps you're offering me some now. I didn't think, when you said that, that probably you meant *I'd* never had the 'true writing instinct.' But I had something, at any rate, which I could empty my life into, as some people *have* to empty their lives, themselves, and it's the loss of that that's done for me."

"Mental hurt," he said, after some time, Mary opposite growing less and less palpable as the fire dimmed: only little points of her stuck out to the vision, lit by lingering rays: "Mental hurt is like a bruise. There's the sharp initial pain and then one feels nothing more, but it's always a tender spot when it's touched." He looked up at where he thought her face was with the smile that meant he had finished his confidences. "I was silly to touch it."

She knew he wanted to get back to ordinary conversation, but she hadn't finished herself yet.

"I suppose—don't fly down my throat, Owen—you never thought of combining the two—desirabilities—in journalism, for instance?"

"A journalist. H'm! A nice compound of quips and other people's epigrams, a good memory

for the same, enough bluff to fill Buckingham Palace. . . . Don't think I'm pushing enough for a journalist, Mary. And, the newspaper profession's a beastly business. Things to our hurt, things to our terror, things to our loathing, lasting discredit, those are what the Press Kite feeds on. I'd as soon be an East India Merchant."

"After all, Owen, it's something to have *had* prosperity. You're not all on the debit side." She mustn't say any more that way, or from giving comfort she'd get to making him ashamed of his outburst. "Anyway, I'm going to make you promise me something."

"What's that?"

"To read me your book."

"I don't even remember where it is."

"Well, you can find it. There's such a thing as re-writing poor parts, Owen."

He shook his head over that, but he couldn't deny that the idea of reading over the old manuscript to Mary tickled him more and more the more he thought of it. The only defeat was lack of an interest in life. . . .

II

Martha had decided that they were now well enough off to sport a car.

Owen supposed they were. The business, with old Linlith gone the way of all flesh, was now completely in his hands: he was lucky to have able, enthusiastic men beneath him, and with the Government all on their side it grew and prospered exceedingly. Tubby would be able to have the University career that William hadn't quite been able to manage for Owen; he would have it good and fat, Owen was determined: he had heard enough of boys sent up by their parents on inadequate allowances, getting into debt and playing the deuce with themselves over the continual strain of keeping up. . . . Martha's idea of having a car was a big limousine, with all the latest in Bedford cord and speaking tubes and flowers in silver holders, and a chauffeur attached who would bring the outfit round from the garage at a telephone message—from Martha. Owen's idea was a sporting little two-seater, an Hispano, for instance, with a turn of speed, that he could dabble and potter over, and make himself into a mess with, like the ill-fated Griselda, of whom he sometimes thought with affectionate regret. Mary, he felt, would like to dabble with him: she could technicalise with anybody, and knew what a choke-tube was, and what a gudgeon, and she could comprehend his envelope diagrams without being either

superior or irritatingly stupid. Mary was amazingly companionable. But when Martha spoke about affording a thing, it always meant that she got it, and got it in a way that made it peculiarly hers, so that people felt they were trespassing on her perquisite if they evinced an inclination to take their share of it. No one felt like that more keenly and more readily than Owen.

There was a car show at Olympia due, and Martha's idea was that they should attend this, and give their order in style at whatever stand took their fancy. Owen would have liked to potter about Great Portland Street and feel that he was picking up a bargain, whatever he bought, but he gave in gracefully about the Show: it was unusual to find Martha interested to attend any function that also interested himself. Unfortunately, the only day of the seven that Martha could go, Mary couldn't: he pressed her, but she couldn't, she said, alter her engagement: she was lunching in town with a friend. She didn't say what friend.

He knew he could not attempt to ask Martha to break one of *her* engagements.

It was difficult to say why, but he could not. The fat of trivial things was more often near to being in the fire with Martha lately: something

of her placidity had disappeared, and something of her warmth had come back, to awaken the fatal response in him and torture him with its superfluity again. . . . It was not coldness in her that crazed him, but her inability to translate or expand passion into anything beyond physical passion. She loved him: she couldn't be in love with him. He was sure, now, that she never had been.

The magnitude of Olympia worried him: the crowds kicked dust up his nose and stamped on his feet, and the long avenues of stands were a bother: he knew they could never get round them all in the time, and if they missed one he would know that one held *the* car in all the world that he would have chosen. Martha was tremendously happy among frocks and friends, and that was something. She was never excitedly pleased, but a kind of calm triumph appeared on her face that suited admirably her warm, strong beauty, and he wondered how much consciousness there was behind that calm of the interest she excited wherever she went. She was a wife to be proud of, with her faultless manner and her perfection of attire: it wasn't right that she should be plain Mrs. Gawne: she ought to be Lady something. He understood, as he watched her, that she had had disappoint-

ments as well as he. But the balance was on her side. They had come to choose a car. . . .

Martha was amusing because she was so much more interested in the shapes of bodies, in enamels and window curtains and upholsteries: than in the mechanical details of the models they lingered over. But the demonstrators didn't smile at her. They were either used to it, or her beauty and presence commanded them. Owen felt lonely and useless and wished for Mary. Two people could keep a glib demonstrator at bay better than one. Martha, of course, didn't need to keep them at bay: she was in her sphere and they were all bound to defer to her.

Lunch was a miserable affair. They had to queue up for the grill-room. There was no table d'hôte, and all the items were huge and expensive, instead of a size to tempt, not debauch the appetite, and consistently reasonable. Owen didn't mind the expense, but the sight of a great deal of food always made him feel sick.

"You're making a miserable lunch," Martha said. She was always careful about him in that way.

"It's these colossal serves that put me off. I can't think why they pile it on us as if we were a school boy's treat."

"It's because they cater for men mostly."

"Well, they ought to know better. There's heaps of women here."

He looked up and about, verifying himself, and straight as a magnetic needle to the poles, his eye flew to Mary. She sat at a table some way down the room, behind Martha; with her was a tallish man, thickly brown-haired, with a little, short, distinguished nose, and a great deal of sloping forehead showing, accentuated by his vigorously back-brushed hair. They were in earnest conversation, but Owen's gaze had hardly rested on Mary before hers flew up to meet it. He was within an ace of saying, with the excitement he felt in his voice: "Why, there's Mary!" He didn't know whether it was loyalty to Mary, or his own hurt pride, that stopped him. But he hurried their meal through for all he was worth. He knew those two would sit tight until he and Martha had gone. Martha, thank God, didn't smoke.

Martha's Daimler, the roomy, reliable, magnificent affair of solid worth which bored him stiff, he accepted as in a dream, confirming her tentative order with his eyes among the crowd, looking for an eminent little nose which, he knew, if he saw it, he must bash. . . . It and Mary had disappeared, swallowed up as only Olympia can

swallow individuality, and Martha, now that the excitement of a purchase was over, complained of acute fatigue. They passed down the great central avenue: the shuffling feet, the roar of demonstrating engines, the humming arc lights and the band down at the other end, only able to get one particularly piercing note through, which it seemed to hold to all the time, all combined to blur the thought of Mary for him when he particularly wanted to think of Mary. He always suffered like that: he apparently had inter-dependent senses. He couldn't taste if there was a noise going on, or smell properly. And he couldn't listen with his eyes shut. . . . Mary had told him a lie, had evaded going to the car show with him because she wanted to go privately with some other man. He wouldn't have minded so much if she had *told* him. . . .

Martha, busy with the fittings of her car, was silent and preoccupied all the way home. He sat back away from her at last in a temper and an ugly hunch, telling himself that everyone had their interesting private concerns but him, that he was out of it all, that he was only the man who paid, and so long as he paid nicely no one would ever credit him with any other ideas. . . . *He* didn't *want* Martha's beastly great stuffy Daimler. . . .

III

"That Miss Mary back?"

"Yes, sir."

He wanted to say: "Tell her I'd like to speak to her," but it was too much like a headmaster sending for his victim. She would come to the study directly she had her things off: he was to begin the second part of his book. Martha was dining out: she was indefatigable: the new Daimler would be going the round of the table.

He didn't know *why* they had tacitly kept these readings private from Martha, and it was annoying to think that they had done so. After all, if he did return to literature now it couldn't hurt Martha: she would be only too pleased if he made a success. But it wasn't deniable that, if she came to the study too, some of the charm of these firelit meetings would be gone, and he'd be horribly shy of reading his own work to his wife. Mary was different: she was so much less impersonal.

Impersonal was a ridiculous word to apply to Mary, and compared with Martha, of all people: but she had an essence of impersonality about her when she listened, all the same. It was that which drew him on.

"Hullo! You're back then!"

"In the flesh." She was smiling: she hadn't sensed his aggressiveness yet. When Mary smiled something beautiful happened to her long, serious face. The dimness of firelight about her suddenly gave her desirability, and the effect it had upon Owen was to increase his wrath.

"I don't know why it was necessary to tell me a lie about this afternoon."

She said, surprised: "I didn't tell you any lie!"

"You didn't tell me the truth."

"I told you I was lunching out with a friend, and it was the perfect truth."

Leaning forward, he accused her: "You didn't expect us in the grill-room, did you?"

"One doesn't expect to see any one in that crowd."

He stood up and thundered: "Don't evade me, Mary! Why didn't you tell me straight out you were going to Olympia with somebody else, and that was why you wouldn't come with me?"

"Owen! You forget yourself." She was very red to match his temper, but quiet. "I'm at perfect liberty to do what I choose, how I choose, when I choose, without asking your permission. You seem to forget that."

"Who is that chap?"

"I'm not bound to answer that question either,

you know. . . . He's a friend of mine, a man I met at the Guildhall." (She went up for pianoforte lessons twice a week.) "He's thinking of buying a car, like you, and he asked me to help him choose."

His sneer was so ugly, and so unmistakable, that she sprang up in a passion to match his own. "How dare you look at me like that? I suppose you think this is the bastard coming out in me, going about with strange men!" He could feel that there was a nobility in her taunt which his could not share.

The coward comes out momentarily in all men when their women turn on them. Owen flinched before her, then sat down heavily in his chair, and covered his eyes with his hands.

"I don't know what's the matter with me, Mary. I beg your pardon. I've no right whatever to question you."

She knew, with an uncanny knowledge, what was the matter with him, but she couldn't tell him in so many words.

"It wasn't the questioning I minded." She hesitated, seemed to make up her mind about something, and slipped to her knees by the fire before him. In the kneeling position there was a strong, fine grace which, standing, she lacked,

about her long lines and the little head perched so high on her straight neck. "I should have told you I was going, Owen, I know that. To put that straight I've got to tell you something that it shames and disgusts me to tell you."

She was obviously embarrassed and hesitant. Owen's pulses tingled. He felt it was wrong, but they did. What a colour Mary put into life! He never had these romantic conversations with his wife; doubted, even, if she knew of their possibility.

"When I first came here, and warned you about my being illegitimate, I wasn't talking through my hat so much as you thought, Cousin Owen. . . . I knew—something—about myself that wasn't right. Whether it's really the result of that sort of thing . . . or whether it's a natural and recurring trait I've never been able to make up my mind.

"It's a terrible, *dirty* thing to have to say. . . . I'm made, somehow, that I'm much too sensible to the opposite sex. . . . Much too susceptible to them and their attractions. . . . I've got the instincts of the flirt and the bigamist, Cousin Owen. And the attraction which goes with that instinct. Men simply *have* to be in love with me and if they aren't I get worked up and jumpy and

neurotic about them. I felt myself beginning to get so about you. . . .

"It isn't love. I don't know what it is. . . . I am not really fit to live in a house where there's a live and healthy man: I can't leave him alone in my mind. I knew that when I came here, and I tried to warn you of it. But there's an instinct against giving yourself away that's sometimes stronger than you are. And then, when I felt myself getting—*that* way—I had to get a hold on myself somehow. The only way was to find another outlet."

She paused, flushed and deadly serious and biting her lips. Her eyes were dry: she gave him the impression that this was too deep, too old, too inexorable a thing for easy tears.

"The man from the Guildhall was going to be my other outlet."

"Does he know that?" asked Owen.

"No! He's nice and interesting, and a gentleman. And unmarried. He was fair game." He felt sure she meant to say: "Fairer game than you."

"My dear little girl, all this might easily be imagination."

"It isn't imagination that when you come into where I am it feels as if an electric current rushed

through the room. . . . It isn't imagination that I can't bear—I can't *stand* you to kiss me, Owen."

He held out his hand to her: "Poor little kid."

"Yes," she said, "you're sweet to me, and tender, and perfect. I couldn't have told you—this disgusting thing—if I hadn't known how perfect you would be. But there's more to it than your sweetness. Now that you know. . . . There's a way that these things have of winding up a spring on their own when nobody's looking, or thinking. Then, when the spring releases suddenly, somebody's hurt. . . . If you were Christ, Owen, and married to Martha, it would be the same. This about me—and the fact that I've told you—isn't fair to Martha. I'll have to go."

He knew *that* was impossible, and he wouldn't take the warning in her eyes seriously.

"Mary, dear, this is all the most utter nonsense. You don't get enough fresh air and exercise, and so you get these morbid ideas. Too much practice and reading, little cousin. . . . I tell you what, I've got to go and fetch that car from the agents on Thursday week. You come with me, and if it's good we'll take a run before Martha gets her engagement tablet pinned on to the dash. Twenty miles or so in the driving seat, with the *screens* back, 'll drive all those cobwebs away."

She shook her head. "It isn't that, Cousin Owen." She suddenly insisted upon their relationship, it seemed to him, with a sense of keeping at bay something that she dreaded her confession to have brought forth. "It's—it's—thank God, I can use that word to you—it's a sex thing. . . . Sex is stronger than fresh air."

"Sex isn't a friend of fresh air, little cousin."

They were both at once and terrifically conscious of the wavering fire, the warm dark about them, the house smells of leather and dust, and, faintly, of human beings.

Mary got up abruptly. "I'm too tired for reading tonight. You'll have to excuse me. That show business is awfully fagging."

"You're not going to bed?"

"No, I'm going to practise in the drawing-room."

He knew he wouldn't see her again that night, and that the practising was only an excuse to get out of their usual warm "Good-night."

"I can't *stand* you to kiss me, Owen." . . .

CHAPTER III

I

MARY'S naïve confession came like a thunderbolt into Owen's life. He knew practically nothing of the psychology of sex, being averse to discussing such topics with any one but his own wife, and Martha gave him no encouragement whatever. She had often told him, in their earlier married days, that she thought she could stand any aspect of the natural life, but she couldn't *bear* it talked about. He had sometimes puzzled whether that was unconscious animalism in her or an extreme delicacy of soul such as he could not boast himself. But there is a curious instinct of sex knowledge in the human mind: not so curious, perhaps, considering the centuries of mating that have gone to produce every living human being in this world. All that Mary had told him about herself he had recognised and appreciated perfectly: it was as if he had heard put into words something that he had always known inside himself. Little, poor, quivering alive Mary. . . .

Mary had not been able to trust herself alone in the room with him: she had gone away into the drawing-room, because she dared not stay. That was a terrible and entrancing thought. . . .

She had said that it humiliated her to tell him such a thing about herself, but he could see, looking back, she had not really been a bit humiliated, only serious and trying to be very fair to Martha. Mary really gloried in being so intensely alive, so chock-full of that mystic electrical force which dull persons hushed up for an indecency. He would like to be as nakedly alive in his body as Mary declared she was. If he could also have the innate spirituality and intellectuality of Mary that made that other part of her such a fine and delicate and wonderful thing, Mary could never be a thing of flesh: her passion would be clean and high and upward sweeping like the strong wind. . . .

II

Owen insisted upon Mary's company during the days that followed, albeit she seemed inclined to avoid him. Although he would not admit it to himself, the brown-haired man from the Guildhall haunted his dreams, sleeping and waking. He developed a sudden passion for the company of his

women-folk which one could not understand and the other shook her head over. He was taking lessons in driving at a garage over the Bridge, with a view to the Daimler, since he didn't intend to sit behind any brass-buttoned chauffeur, and he made them come across to watch his gyrations, or to go little, furtive, self-conscious prowlings with him round the back streets as he grew more proficient at the wheel.

"Owen's opened out a lot lately," Martha told Mary, between jerks in the ancient tonneau. "You've done him good."

"He wants a lot of keeping up to the mark. You can *feel* enthusiasm rising in Owen, like a wind, if you blow the bellows hard enough."

There was a sense of safety in thus discussing Owen's psychology with Martha behind his back. She felt at that moment how impossible it would be to take him from the beautiful, successful woman sitting beside her on the dusty blue cord. There were years of intimacy and of wonderful memories which she could not touch, between them. . . . Martha had a most beautiful figure. Her blouses hung and clung delicately down that scoop of soft white flesh below the neck; then there was the heavenly curve of her figure filling out the stuff perfectly, not a lank or uncomfortable line

anywhere. Mary's blouses flattened and bulged in all the wrong places, and there was a flat gap between her bust and her waist that every man would know was hideous. She knew she could beat Martha with no clothes on at all, but what was the use of that? She wasn't an artist's model.

"I wonder why it is," she thought to herself, "that men paint us skinny and long and boneless, when in real life it's *flesh* they want. . . .I couldn't hold a man comfortable in my arms, and he'd know it.

"Some women are made for that sort of cosiness that Rupert Brooke liked. 'Sleepy, mother-comfort.'

"My love's all *bony*. . . . I couldn't be soothing to save my life."

It didn't occur to her that Owen might have had all he wanted of soothing and comfort in twelve years of married life with Martha. She felt restless and depressed, and in some way Owen's bad, jerky changes, his uncertainty at corners, the leap and tug and jar of an unskilfully used accelerator, added to her discontent. She told herself, crossly, she wouldn't come again till he knew the difference between a clutch and a pitch fork. . . .

Then, on the top of a disappointment about the Daimler, which was held up for another week,

there was skating, and all of them went daily to Pen Ponds, squeezing every minute they could for the fickle frost, wet, bedraggled, red-nosed, and violently exhilarated as only the agony of ice-skating can exhilarate. There, at any rate, Mary could beat Martha, who could be heard at Sheen when she flopped, and spent more time prostrate on the bank, greeting friends as they flashed or hobbled by, than she did on the ice. It was not much fun in the daytime, with all Richmond, Barnes, and Mortlake there, but the moonlight parties were a joy for ever. Tubby was allowed to stay up late, and flopped about, a little, endearing figure, bursting with fat and clothes, and never on his feet for more than a minute at a time, yet always up again with the same delighted chuckles at his own inability. Owen was the only one of the party who could skate a little, and he had his hands full. Once Mary sat on his stomach and winded him; once they managed to get across the lower pond from end to end without mishap, and Owen put his arm around her and hugged her with delight. It was queer, how the ice purified, and yet intensified, all these queer stirrings and disturbances. She hadn't realised before what a delightful brother Owen would make. Lena Berrington fiercely commandeered him on the second night,

but Mary could console herself with young Biss, whose arm was iron, and who swore that she would make a wonderful skater and that he'd kill her if she let any one else mess up her style before she was properly fixed. Mary, as Owen struggled by with Lena Berrington, obviously having an awful time, laughed with the cold of youth in her blood, and then as suddenly was filled with an indescribable tenderness for Owen, poor, sweet Owen, who could only skate a little, and so funnily! . . .

III

"D'you like this sort of thing?" Owen wanted to know.

Mary shrugged her shoulders. She hated being talked to at the piano because she suffered under an inability to regulate her speech when she was playing: either it came all in time to the music, which sounded absurd, or it got between her and the notes and sent her hopelessly wrong.

"Can't think what Martha sees in it," he wondered, looking round. Martha was having her "day": she had one every week now, and they grew rapidly more into the nature of receptions than mere suburban at homes. Today, for the first time, there were banked flowers and imported

fernery, and a waiter from the Castle. Martha was always just as ambitious every time: if she had the Prime Minister to dinner one night, she'd want the King the next.

"She does, it, for you, as much as for, herself," said Mary, to the time of a Speaight miniature.

"That's what I never can see—what good it does me."

"Weren't you approached for a Councillorship last week?" she demanded, giving up the miniature as hopeless.

"Yes, blast 'em!"

"Well——!"

"But I don't want to be a Councillor. I want to be left alone."

"You can't make Martha see that."

"*You* could," he declared, looking down at her intently and shyly.

She declined the invitation with thanks. "But," she said, "what you've got to do is to show her you can be famous in your own way. Put her on the right track. She's only asking to help you. She's done that all her life, if you'll only show her how you *do* want to be helped."

"How do you mean, famous in my own way?"

"Your writing, of course. You've only got to

do the work: Martha'd get fame round you like sticks round a fire."

"Mary," he said, with real pain in his voice, "it's no good. I read that chapter I'd re-written last night, and it's piffle. *Piffle.* And I can't alter it. I'm too old, that's the plain fact."

"Oh, Owen!"

"I know. It's dreadful. It's dreadful to feel that I've disappointed you.

"That I shan't *ever* be associated with literature, after all, the one thing that's near my heart.

"I really knew this all along, when you first tried to stir me up again, but you're fearfully good at temptation. . . . Mary, dear, I didn't mean to be clumsy. . . . Your sweet young confidence and enthusiasm——"

He smiled at her, concealing his tenderness at the thought of how she had spurred him on.

"'Owen, flattered by his betters
Thought himself a man of letters——'

I couldn't stand another failure, Mary. It's no good. You know it's no good!"

She did know.

She got up suddenly from the piano, pushing away the pile of music with an impatient hand, so that it slithered right away down the polished top

of the grand and fell off the other end with a loud flop. Young Biss picked it up for her, but she scowled at him. She was suddenly sick of the people, the heated air, the hum, the plates and plates of rich, sickly food.

"I must think—I must think what can be done, Owen. I can't *think* here."

. . . . . .

She had a plan ready for him next evening, and he was all the more ready to listen to it because, since their fateful talk after the Show, he hadn't been able to lure her into the study as easily as he used, and when she did come she would only stay to listen to his writing: any conversation that didn't centre around that invariably sent her away. He had strongly that sense of unfinishedness which the sudden and unexpected opening of intimacy between two people always gives. He wanted extremely to talk to Mary, he felt he could talk to her. But she couldn't stay a minute to hear.

"Owen, I've got it!"

"What's the scheme now, little cousin?"

"I've always felt about you that what you wanted was to be *in* literary things, rather than literary yourself, exactly. And then, when you were unhappy the other night because you'd never be associated with literature, I saw how I was right

and it wasn't the fame you wanted so much with this," she weighed the condemned manuscript in her hand, "as the interest, the interest of writing it, and of being a person who wrote——

"What you've got to do, Owen, is to help other people who *can* write!"

She was so full of her project that he didn't have time to wince at the brutality of that.

"Nearly all great authors, when they begin to get past it, when they realise their day is over, get a protégé. Some likely young writer whose work they preface, and keep their names before the public that way. In his work, in their approval of it, their fame lives on. Wells has done it. Barrie's done it. You must have protégés!"

"But I'm not a great author," he objected. "My day is over all right, but——"

"That's where my scheme's so good. There isn't any need for you ever to have written a word in your own life. You're interested in authors, that's enough. What you can do is to—to endow a home for them: some place where they can live on practically nothing while they do their writing. How many geniuses are lost to the world because they couldn't spare the time from earning their daily bread to give their genius a chance?

"You could make it impossible for another life

to be ruined as yours was ruined, Owen, for want of means to earn a livelihood."

He found himself wondering when and how she had discovered that he admitted his life to have been ruined.

"You're, a little idealist," he said, affectionately smiling at her. Mary in this eager mood always seemed so much younger, a lovable child in the way that Tubby was lovable, as far removed as the poles from the mystical, uncanny woman of firelight and shadow, who uncurbed those awful impulses in him with a mere look from her eyes. . . . "I'm not a Carnegie, you know, Mary."

"You could start in a small way. Just a couple of rooms somewhere—a small house in some cheap neighbourhood. Other people would come to help. These things always grow."

"It's worse wanted than a good many societies and homes that flourish," he said, slowly, getting interested.

"Publishers would be interested. . . . You'd be a sort of go-between the commercial side of literature and the—the what-d'ye-call-it side. Fancy, Owen, if you'd discovered Shaw, or Kipling! There must be some more Shaws and Kiplings about somewhere."

They discussed it at such length that Martha

came at last to ask if they were holding a Watch-night Service, and did they know it was half-past twelve in the morning?

Owen slept shockingly that night, a sure sign with him of happy intellectual interest and activity.

IV

The Daimler, already overdue a week, was still not ready when they arrived at the agents: all was not well with the wiring for the lighting set, and, while greasy youths in dungarees crawled and twiddled, Owen and Mary explored the show-rooms, trying driving seats, testing footboard springing, and entering, with a lordly air, magnificent tonneaux which it intrigued them to fancy, for a minute, they possessed.

"Now drive me to the Operah!" said Mary, ensconced in what was more an upholstered bed than a seat in a gorgeous Siddeley-Deasy, done throughout in a smarting canary yellow which made all the other cars look like dowdy old ladies round a Paris mannequin.

"Would you like to go?" He looked at her, feeling young and daring.

"I'd like to go anywhere—round the world for preference—in this."

"Where would you like to go, really, tonight?" he asked her, intrigued by the thought of the opera with her. Music always set Mary alight.

"Down a straight road with nothing in the way and no hedges to spoil the scenery."

"That means Leatherhead. All right, Mary: if you're thrown out remember it was by your own wish."

"There's some sense in a car," he observed presently. "If a horse drops dead he's done for for all time. I always have a sense of the terrific *waste* when I see a gee-gee laid out or going to the knackers. All that huge hulk and strength rendered useless because a little spark called life's gone from it. . . . But your car's got more lives than a cat, and even when it's past its work you can take the guts out of it and make a new one with them. There's waste in God's work, not much in man's."

They took the Bayswater Road as far as Shepherd's Bush and then skirted along the Goldhawk Road to Hammersmith for Kew and Kingston and "a straight road with nothing in the way." In the bright moonlight the green was dotted with vagrants, taking their ease in despite of the cold: "like bodies after a battle," said Mary, pointing them out and shivering for them as they slid past. Owen, a little mazed by the traffic in Oxford Street,

was getting his hand in in the quieter suburbs. He took the great car through Hammersmith with an ease and grace which turned the blood in his veins to wine: they had a contretemps in the sweep past the Star and Garter at Kew Bridge, where Mary visioned their off mudguard cutting a coster's barrow clean in half, but the barrow, by some intervention of God, remained intact: nothing was affected but Mary's stomach, which, she knew, was torn out of her body and hurled a few miles into the starlit void, but she sat tight and smiled and Owen began to look proud. . . . When they had crawled out of Kingston, like some huge night-moth from its cocoon, and begun the mad flight Sussexwards, Mary felt that she didn't care if they did have an accident in the end, that they *must* have an accident, that the only possible end to this exquisite rushing through icy air and icy light with Owen would be pain, real, solid, physical pain for herself—death even. . . . They had no accident, however, and at Burford Bridge Owen stopped, stabled the car outside the hotel and made her come into the bright room, all stiff and strung and confused as she was, and have a cherry brandy to warm herself. The clear tan liquid stung like fire, she could feel it flaming its way along deep down in her body.

"All right?"

She nodded, her eyes bright.

"That's good. We had a posh run, and I think I've got that brute whacked now. She's spongy, though, very spongy yet." He was strong and proud, conscious, and making Mary conscious, of his mastery over the sluggish vastness of the Daimler. He walked to the window and, parting the curtains, looked out. "This moonlight's fine. Have you ever been on top of Box Hill? Like to come up now?"

"I didn't know it was here," she said, scrambling over the rest of her liqueur.

"We really passed it coming along. That's the finest bit of scenery in Surrey. Leith Hill's not in it. But the path is a bit rough. You'll have to mind your feet."

He minded them for her, with sudden tenderness, but the cold air and the blue light was between them, and if she had tried she could not have made anything of it but this subtle, senseless ecstasy that was the moon and the speed they had tasted in the Daimler and the crisp grass under her feet, and the still, icy air, and anything or everything but Martha's Owen being won away from Martha. . . . He showed her the corner, with the fence still broken, where some famous motor-

cyclist had tried to ride down the path and crashed through that fence and been instantly killed. Then they gained the top, if a tableland of nobbles could be called the top, and Mary, finding a venerable molehill of terrific dimensions, poised herself upon it, bowing fantastically to the moon and turning herself round and about to view the county of Surrey spread out beneath her. Mary's slender body and elfin limbs were the only human thing that could live among the exquisite black tracery of the trees, the pinpoint stars, the sharp, fierce, faithful light. He leaned up to her, stretching on tiptoe to reach her face.

"Mary, little exquisite thing! Little, sweet body!"

She gave him kisses swift and cool as raindrops, each one leaving a tiny, icy patch where it fell upon his face. He could want kisses like that too, under the moon's spell, and he stood still, content to have her lean now and then and touch him, as a swaying flower touches the grass, undisturbed from her pose of ecstasy. But in the darkness at the bottom of the hill he caught her out of a stumble and she could let loose for him then the tempest of the past weeks, fierce and hard and quick from lip to lip, her young breast digging triumphantly into his boniness; like all guilty

lovers, since words could only be a reminder of guilt, they did not speak, but lifted terrible lips and tried, with crushing close to one another, to crush out the ache from bone and body. . . .

"I can't believe it's so early," said Mary at the last feeling the stones in the gullies suddenly sharp under her thin soles. The sense of wrong and the deep moonlight and quiet belonged to the small hours, not to eight o'clock in the evening. "I can't face dinner tonight, Owen: what shall we do?"

He didn't want dinner either, since it meant Martha, calm and innocent, with her healthy appetite, and that awful sense of detachment from her brooding over them. But he did want badly a fire and electric light and four walls about him, anything sane and normal to help him get a grip on the situation, to find out its real value.

"We might go on somewhere," she suggested to his hesitation, very low.

He knew perfectly well what she meant, but he wasn't ready for that yet. He had twelve years of married life behind him to pit against Mary's young passion, and he was horribly unused to handling intrigues. "I think we'll have to stick it out tonight," he warned her, gently. "We must—I must talk this over with you. . . .

We've *got* to talk it over. . . . If you can, Mary, you must come to me this evening——"

She knew that "if you can" meant if Martha had gone out and left them a clear field. If Martha had not, if a whole night and a day must pass before she and Owen might meet masks off, she felt convinced that she would lose him. She realised how much of a danger point the incident on Box Hill had been. Owen would go on indefinitely mounting up and up the slow steps of intrigue, but if any one forced a climax on him she knew, none better, that he would go down the other side. In a way, she had realised how much she was staking; the kisses on the molehill were nothing, they were outside and beyond herself, part of the night as the sighing of the wind is part of the night, but she had allowed them to light a more human emotions afterwards, knowing perfectly what it meant. She prayed, on the slow journey home—Owen must be trying to make them too late for dinner —that this night of all nights Martha would not see fit to forsake the socialities she had preserved and still added to with such pride and determination.

Just before they entered Kingston, the last of the loneliness, Owen slackened a moment to reach her along to him, with a strong movement of the

gauntletted hand that wrenched the wheel in the other to a heart-stilling skid. "Little sweet Mary!" Too young to be sure of tenderness, she thought she heard pity in his voice, and clenched her teeth.

"Our Father which art in Heaven, if only Martha isn't there, Hallowed be Thy Name——"

Ellen at the door bore her the good news.

"If you please, sir, the mistress waited dinner till eight o'clock but she couldn't stay, she had to meet Mr. Reath: she won't be in till late, sir. Shall I serve for you now, sir?"

"We'll have sandwiches in the study," Owen ordered with a glance at Mary. "Bring some wine in. And you needn't wait up." He turned to Mary. "I've got to run that brute round to the garage. Don't wait for me if the things come up, you're looking fagged."

"Milk and honey in the love-nest." Ellen translated the order below stairs. "And all to cover before the mistress comes in, or there'll be a few heads flying about. 'Night everybody!"

V

Owen had put in some hard thinking on the way home. Unlike Mary, for whom there were only

two characters in this little drama, he had other persons beside himself to think for, and he realised that his unlicensed passion was handicapped in a way that Mary would neither realise nor recognise . . . Mary! He saw well enough why he loved her, how he had come to love her. He would have given something to believe that it was all infatuation, an old man's passion for youth, but that wouldn't wash. Mary was not the sort to catch and renew the satiated senses and worn-out sentiment of age: she was not pretty, nor round, nor soft, nor appealing, nor even particularly young. She would be a lean mate. . . . And it was absurd to think of himself as an old man. He knew perfectly well that she had come to his body through his mind, and though his body might repel her his mind would never be free. Mary had taken him at his own valuation: she had credited him with the ability of his enthusiasm and she had endeavoured with him against that one defeat which is the lack of an interest in life. Sweetest of all, she had shown herself to be dependent upon him. . . . Viewing the two in terms of himself he saw that Martha was strong, but Mary, in spite of all her eagerness and virility, weak, and her weakness was as myrrh and frankincense to Owen.

VI

When he came into the study she had finished her sandwiches and sherry and sat in the armchair waiting for him. She looked well and happy: the wind had made her cheeks burn furiously, and her dress of softish looking fawn-coloured material suited the lank figure infinitely better than the blouses and skirts she nearly always wore.

"I wonder how *you* feel," he said, when he took her in his arms.

"Feel?" Her laugh had the ring of undisturbed happiness within it. "I've always understood that this—this sort of thing was bound to be bitter-sweet. . . . Sad and mad and bad, you know. But the sweetness is too big for that, it rules everything else out."

He studied her with tenderness. "So happy?"

"Can't you see? . . . It isn't the right occasion, exactly, I'm afraid, but my soul magnifies all right——"

"You little funny sweet bad thing. . . . So does mine!"

"Dear old Wells always has inside information about human emotions," she reflected, presently. "He discovered the *rightness* of these wrong things,

the *sense* of rightness that makes it all so difficult. It's terribly, incomprehensibly true."

He said, painfully: "I'm afraid the most outstanding feature of human emotions is their frailty," and she turned to him at once with eagerness.

"That's what I want to know! That's what you must tell me. I don't know how to put it. . . . If I'm only something extraneous, a little, extra affair that means nothing to Martha——"

"My dear!"

"Oh, men are so," she persisted to his protest. "And one comes horribly to realise it. . . . How these ravening emotions between men and women are indeed only flashes in the pan, and won't survive a new interest, wider responsibility. . . . Whether or not to take the flash seriously, while it flashes, that's the question. And whichever we do, we women are lost."

Owen said, with some bitterness: "You might have realised that, if I was only doing this as an amusement, I wouldn't have asked you to come here to talk it over, to try to get things clear. . . . I locked this door when I came in: you know what I could make that mean." Her quick, flooding colour and involuntary movement stirred him, but he went on, dispassionately: "I haven't

thought of what I *could* do, though, what, secretly and with no one the wiser, I could take. I've tried to think of what was best and fairest for you, for us all."

She knew "for us all" meant Martha, and was silent.

"I can't discuss Martha with you," he began, as if he had read her thought. "You, I am perfectly certain, know all there is to know about that." He passed his hand with a weary movement across his eyes. "I can't ever make out quite how we came to miss it so badly. A man never knows how his wife is going to pan out: I suppose it's the same with women. Every bigamist makes his plea incompatibility, I know that, but it's true of us, all the same. We couldn't ever *make* anything of each other, somehow. It was like two winds blowing at once. . . . She couldn't blow me her way, poor soul."

Mary wished he wouldn't harp on Martha so much. It was absurd to say he wouldn't discuss her and then keep on along this tack. Absorbed in her own impatience, she didn't realise how desperately he was feeling his way towards justification, nor how much of a relief it was to speak out his unhappiness, embroidering it, after the twelve years of repression. But she was touched when he

rose and took from a drawer in his desk, after a good deal of fumbling, two sheets of foolscap paper, with the yellowish appearance and crispness of age, on which there was some typewriting, and handed them to her.

"Those two poems there. I wrote *this* one when I was first married: the other one was later, I was away in Birmingham on business. Birmingham's a depressing hole. . . . I'm not too proud of either of them, but they'd give you, perhaps, an idea——

"These are the last I ever did."

Mary read them both with tears in her neart. There was a reality of pain about them that his own fumblings between loyalty and self-pity had not been able to convey. Nights and days of unhappiness must have gone to the making of such as this:

> My head is heavy on your breast:
> Your breath goes broken over me:
> Beneath your warm throat, childishly,
> My two hands rest.
>
> Oh, love, my dear, is in your blood
> That burns and surges under me:
> And you a trembling ecstasy
> Half understood. . . .
>
> And still there's something in your eyes
> Goes over me—goes over me:

Love that lingers passingly,
Dreams—and flies.

Never love we two but there
Beneath your heart that beats for me
Lies clutched to you the Thing to be—
Your passion's all maternity!
Dear, is it quite fair?

and this—(Poor Owen, so unhappy all alone in Birmingham.)

The truth is this, that every word you utter
Jars on me, and the things you write are worse:
Love is so sweet. . . .

her own words! How strange, and how terrible, that he should have thought that then too, with the thought of Martha behind it—

And suddenly the clatter
Of your poor tongue is driving me to curse
You and the bald, halt brain of you that peers
So blindly after mine.
And every night
There comes a letter from you: and I take
Those neat-writ sheets and kiss them where you might
Have brushed your fingers over them, and shake
With hate for you at every word I read
And fling them in the fire, and wish you dead!

—poor Owen, how long he had struggled! And *now she* was dragging him out of his peaceful non-

caring and setting him to struggling all over again. Wouldn't it have been kinder to let him alone?

> God help us! God who let us think it love,
> This patchy passion in us: set to move
> These warring senses. If I could but slough
> My body: you, your mind: or could the heart
> Hold human love entire! But we've to plough:
> I through immense disgust, and you through fear.

—but that was a bit of poet's licence on Owen's part: she couldn't imagine Martha being afraid. Poor dear, perhaps he couldn't find another rhyme!

> To reach each other, and so wearily!
> Weary? I'm torn, I'm tortured with you, dear:
> We're so ill-mated, hopelessly at odds,
> Nor joined, nor with the strength to be apart.
> Ah me! this tricksy life that we've been lent,
> How will it end? Must all our days be spent
> Utterly drearily?

Oh, no, no, no! If he had laid down his pen in bitterness and misery ("These are the last I ever did") he should not so lay down his love—he should not! She cried to him and took him passionately in her arms and covered him with kisses. "My poor, my poor!"

He kept on insisting, with the miserable petulance of a child: "She couldn't see, she couldn't

see. . . . She hadn't any eyes in her heart! She couldn't *see* how much it hurts to love——

"But what are we going to do?" he exclaimed, when they were calm again.

"Do——"

"But if she won't divorce me!"

She looked at him under straight brows. "We shouldn't be able to help that."

"Mary, I *won't* support a guilty intrigue! If I can't have you the real way. . . . Dear, don't look at me like that. Don't you understand how there's a contentment, a confidence in each other which comes after marriage. . . . Passion thrown back on itself makes people jumpy, nervous of each other, quick to take offence. I want us to get over that, and we can't—like this. . . ."

"I want to be all I can to you: I want you to be all you can to me."

"Dear, if I could make you see. . . . Behind the brute in every man, behind the brute in me, I think there's a fatherly, paternal instinct that wants to work itself out in your protection and service. That's what we couldn't have if we went on—like this. It's the holding together instinct, the sense of mutual dependence that casual lovers can't have, and so in the end they always split apart——"

But with the sense of jealousy in spite of all, which every married man must inspire in his amours, at work within her, she wouldn't help him.

"Then, if she *won't*—do what you said, you'll turn me out?"

"Oh—Mary——!"

"We women are worse off even than animals," she burst out suddenly, on some new line of thought. "All female animals are given the instincts they need: the instincts to pull them through these complications without harming themselves or—or any possible other. But we—you've deprived us of our guardian instincts by all this in-breeding and civilisation, and now what have we left as our armour? Just a patchy, terrified guessing of the things man does—the things man does! not even knowing right from wrong now, we must put ourselves entirely in your hands—for better for worse, God knows it's that! And if you choose to tell us wrongly through ignorance or—or worse——

"We haven't got any 'voice crying in the wilderness' to guide us! None of us knows any more than what men choose to tell us—and *they* won't spoil their pleasure for the truth's sake!"

"I don't know whether all this is a hit at me," he began, very red.

"It's a hit at all this stupid, shilly-shallying system that devitalises us and knocks the youth out of us. Men and women've got the instincts of beasts, they should be allowed to follow their instincts. . . . I'll go to bed now, Owen, if you'll unlock the door. Our talking 'it over' doesn't seem to have amounted to much. . . . I'm *fearfully* tired."

She looked it, and instinctively he let her go without attempting a caress or any further discussion. It had been an evening of great strain for both of them, and, too tired himself to think clearly, he followed her up almost directly, thinking with relief of the cool sheets and the sharp bedroom air after his close study. But a shock awaited him at his door, which he found to be locked on the inside. Then Martha must be in. How quiet she had been. . . . But she never *locked* her door!

"Martha!" he called, rapping softly at the panels: "Martha!" he whispered through the keyhole, with alarm at his heart.

She came at last, turning on the light as she crossed the room: he could hear the little click of the switch. He saw with bewilderment that she was still fully dressed.

"So you've not gone to bed," he exclaimed.

"No."

"I hadn't any idea you were in."

"I know that, Owen." He couldn't make her manner out, so composed and yet full of menace, a menace that he couldn't place or define.

"You might have given us a look. . . . I say, Martha, aren't you going to let me come in!"

She said, without the slightest deviation from her tremendous calm: "*Why* do you think I locked my door then?"

"What!"

"You're surely not going to pretend to misunderstand me, Owen."

"I don't know what the devil all this tragic business is about," he began, deliberately, "but we'd better come inside and talk it over quietly, whatever it is. We don't want all the servants to hear me being barred out of my own bedroom."

"Oh, they've heard worse things than *that*," but she let him in, giving him the impression that, for all her composure, she didn't know what on earth to do.

"Now," he said, locking the door quietly behind him, "let's hear what all the hue-and-cry's about."

"There'll be no hue-and-cry but what you yourself have made. . . . You might at least

have spared me *that*, Owen: you who care so much for what the servants may hear. It's easy enough to take your pleasure without adding open insult to my burden."

"What on earth do you mean, open insult?"

"The study door locked, you and she inside for all the world to know, the servants sent to bed!" she mocked.

"Oh, I see." He grew brutal as his temper rose. "I see the idea. I hadn't realised how far you'd got with—with your pretty little imagination."

She ignored that, though the blood came up painfully over her face. "It's too absurd, I know, how we wives strain at the gnat and swallow the camel. I've seen this coming for days, it's common talk in the kitchen. But till you laid this public shame upon me I've never *revolted* as I have tonight. . . . It would have been so easy for you to take your harlot elsewhere, and spare me the contempt—no, the pity, that's worse, of my own servants."

"Who is this harlot you refer to?" he asked. He couldn't help wanting to laugh. Martha, in her smart evening frock, standing there and talking of his harlot! He wished one of them could say something that would impart reality to the

affair: it was too melodramatic, he couldn't get a grip on the business with all these high epithets flying about.

"Perhaps you don't *remember* who was in the study? I hadn't realised you were quite so—so profuse. . . . Of course, Mary wouldn't mind that."

"Careful, Martha!"

Her sneer, at all events, was real enough. "One doesn't have to be careful with that type. Or to blame them overmuch. . . . It's in her blood, anyway."

"You—*bitch!*"

He sprang forward and struck her fairly in the face. He could see the print of his hand, yellowish-white like dead flesh above her warm skin, then slowly fading as if the blow passed inwards. He had a swift sensation that it had, indeed, gone farther than the flesh, to the deep and hidden part of her, beyond his remedy or his regret. At last, after all these years, he had touched her soul . . . But he was beyond control then, his own or any one else's.

"Owen!"

She stood, aghast, against the bed where the violence of his blow had pushed her.

"You *are* a bitch! An animal. You've got

legs and teeth and a stomach, and a reproducing system, and the soul and spirit of a dog louse!

"Wenching and child-bearing are all you're fit for. . . . And you dare to talk of Mary—Mary——

"You've ruined my life! All this pushing me on and netting people in, it's been for your own glorification, no more. You've left me nothing, nothing.

"My own son——"

He pushed past her, making a decision as he went. If he didn't keep up his anger, he would dissolve into tears before her at the thought of Tubby.

"None of this filthy tale you've got about Mary and me in the study is true. Of course, you don't believe that. You dirty married women, exploiting your grubby little knowledge. . . . But that doesn't matter. I'm going to *make* it true."

He went out, slammed the door behind him, and mounted the three stairs to Mary's room, whimpering in his throat as he went.

"It's too much—it's too much. . . . All these women! They *won't* leave a man alone. . . ."

Mary stood in her vest in the middle of the room,

and from her attitude he was certain she had been listening to all the hullabaloo.

"Owen! What's the matter? My darling, you've got tears in your eyes: what's wrong?"

She wasn't in the least embarrassed at his finding her with only her vest on. Martha, shyest woman in all the world, would have prayed the earth to swallow her. He had rather loved that shyness of body, in such quaint contradistinction to the frank practicality of her soul. . . . In the long, thin garment he could see more than ever what a slim Jim Mary was, but all her lankness had disappeared with the badly chosen clothes. The slender limbs, the straightness that had an appeal of its own, as distinct from that of curves as the moon's beauty is distinct from the sun's, were lovely. Women like Mary ought always to run about undressed. . . . In a flash he knew what she reminded him of, with her big eyes, the strange, pleased light in them as she turned to him, and the long, perfect legs. She might have sat, as she was now, clad only in the long silk slip, for one of those figures which had so vexed his soul in the Strand picture shop.

He came forward and sat heavily on the bed, dropping his head into his hands with a gesture of weariness that struck tears from her heart.

"I'm rather adrift, Mary. Martha's done with me. . . . If you won't take me——"

. . . . . .

"What a little tempest you are," he said presently with sadness in his smile. "Too young and live for me really, little firebrand.

"You know, of course, that I *am* too old for you. While you're a kid I shall be wanting to doze after my dinner and stay by my own fireside——"

"You've always wanted *that*," she reminded him.

"Yes, but it isn't the same when one's tied to a man. . . . And I've got a shocking temper. Worse and worse.

"I struck Martha tonight because I was in a temper. I struck my wife."

He could feel her thrill to that, and the Gawne in him, the real, secret Owen that was not swayed by women, nor wanted them, nor understood their inconceivable instincts, their horrible ways, was at once revolted. He became suddenly aware that he didn't want Mary's fierce, uncomfortable passion. She was a lean mate indeed. . . . He was a poor man in a devilish mess, deserted by his wife, and he wanted more than anything else the comfort of Martha, the compassion of Martha, the quiet,

unalterable tenderness of his kind wife, Martha. . . . He wanted soothing out of his panic, and he wanted the nightmare of all the tact and initiative he would have to display next morning taken away from him. Mary, feeling his mood, did her best: she held his face to her little, useless breasts and crooned to him as best she could, swallowing her aversion to that sort of meaningless nonsense, but she couldn't hide the need in herself that flowed into and overflowed all her efforts, rendering them unreal and gawky. It wasn't Martha's "baby-ing," that, with the perverseness of man, he wanted now for the first time more than he wanted anything in the whole wide world.

CHAPTER IV

I

MARTHA'S decree nisi took some time to procure: the list of cases that year was long and included several of distinction, for which both Owen and Martha were duly thankful. Mary, once having burnt her boats, did not seem to mind who saw the smouldering of the ashes. Her one idea was tφ get away with Owen into some quiet place where at last she could really feel he was her own, and he did take her away practically at once, realising the unthinkableness of the situation, as soon as he found that he could do nothing for Martha, or rather that he was not to be allowed to do anything for her. Martha's calmer, colder nature could not understand the quick transition from unfaithfulness and blind rage to an apologetic sympathy which could be eager to proffer her any assistance, though the facts of the situation remained unaltered. Owen had chosen Mary instead of herself, therefore he was her enemy: she

had no conception of friendliness living among the ruins of passion.

Berrington's brother, who was a barrister, would give her all the advice she needed: the Berringtons would work themselves to shadows in order to right Martha's wrongs as, meagrely, they might be righted. She had half Richmond at her feet, only waiting her command to tear the unpopular Owen's eyes out. The divorce would be perfectly easy, there was no hitch. Ellen could testify to the locked study door. All the servants had heard the high words between master and mistress from time to time, when Owen's devil got the better of him. They could all testify, with personal additions, to his shocking temper. He smiled to think how perfectly he, by nature most harmlessly intentioned of men, corresponded with the popular notion of the worst type of divorcé. And there was the bruise on Martha's face. . . . It was a bigger one than even he had anticipated, and it bulged her nose out to a ridiculous angle, a blackish cyst, chased here and there with plum colour, as the light took it. That mutilated nose helped the artistic Owen through the parting more than he would have believed. Martha, cold and righteously raging, was a noble and awful thing, but Martha cold and righteously raging with a

plummy nose got, somehow, on the wrong side of the line. . . . The only feature of the whole business that seemed real enough to be tragic, or tragic enough to be real, was his parting with Tubby.

He had never before realised so keenly that, in spite of all Martha's calm appropriation, his son's loyalty to his father was still a living and working and conscious thing. Martha, Owen knew, had gone with her first blind hurt to Tubby, and he realised that even six-year-olds, given a nurse with a tongue in her head, can appreciate the difference between a bad, cruel father, and a poor mamma whose nose is swollen. . . . He sent Ellen for his son at the last with a shrinking more bitter and shameful than any he had known during those days of nightmare encounters, with Martha, with his servants, with Henry Berrington accidentally in the street, with Mary, morning after morning.

"Hullo, Tub! Come to say good-bye?"

"Nanna supposed you wanted me," Tubby explained, faithfully translating Ellen's message.

"Oh, well." It was difficult to have any intimate parting communication with a son you saw, on an average, perhaps for a quarter of an hour daily, and that not alone. "How's the report this time?"

"Oh, well. It's not *very* interesting this time."

Tubby's scholarship was of the slightest.

"Good Lord! That's a pity. You'd better let me have a look at it."

"Oh, I think, I'm rather *sure* mamma's using it just now!"

Owen laughed. "All right, son. You'll be a famous lawyer some day."

"I wonder how long you'll be away?" Tubby enquired, politely, keeping up the conversation.

"You should ask your mother that."

"She said, she couldn't tell in days or years, but as long as some people's lives."

He was silent for a minute, and then, turning his round eyes fully upon his father, said in the most exquisite tone of gentle politeness and concern: "Did you happen to know that some small creegers called may-flies only live a day? Only a *day* and if it isn't very warm sometimes just a few hours, you know."

"Do they, by Jove! That's a jolly useful thing to know!"

"Isn't it? We learn that sort of jolly useful thing in najrul history.

"Elephants live for hundreds of years sometimes," he observed later, with the same perfect, detached gentleness, but the hopeful accent gone from it.

Owen had to pick up Mary at St. Pancras by six, and he still had odd things to attend to, such as a man may who has to clear up twelve years of life in a few days, leaving no traces behind him.

"Look here, old cuddly bean, I'm rather busy. We'll have to say ta-ta now, I think." He hesitated, whether to outrage the tiny dignity by picking the boy up and suffocating him with kisses, as he longed to, or to make the parting sanely and as befitted men of six and forty, leaving Tubby sanguine, unstartled.

Tubby's face was so perfectly circular that if a murder had been committed before his eyes it could not have lengthened nor lost its jovial serenity for one instant. But at the moment of peril there always appeared, carven from nose to chin at either side, one large deep, flesh-enfolded crease, which opened and shut and reopened alarmingly as his weakness or his resolve asserted itself. Thus distorted now, he approached Owen, hand outstretched—a spotless hand, cleaner and better-tended by far than his own, the proper and only hand for a child of Martha's—and once, twice, surreptitiously blinking.

"I can't say I *particuly* want you to go," he announced, in his even, exquisitely polite tones.

With the strength of thirty-eight, which is so

infinitely greater at times than the strength of six, Owen lifted his son bodily into the air and held him crushed there, two stiff and spotless boots making agonies in the middle of his stomach, one exquisite fist violently intrigued with his neck inside the tight travelling collar.

"I don't—particuly—want to go, Tubs."

For that moment, at least, he knew it was true. And also, just at that moment, he felt shame and astonishment at the way he had taken for granted Martha's calm taking it for granted that Tubby would be left with her. He had never imagined for a second that she would act otherwise: and he knew, too, that he hadn't a ghost of a chance with any court. And anyhow he and Mary couldn't have thought of it. But it was, all the same, an incredible and scourging thought that he had put up no sort of a fight for his own child.

In that, again, as in all the events of his life, the dominating power that was in Martha had triumphed.

"Better run to mamma now, little chap." He put him down gently. "And don't forget about those may-flies."

As a lifelong parting it wasn't much of a success, but how can you be tragic with a little round boy of six, with creases in his face and a perfectly

flattened stomach, so great are his efforts towards composure, who thinks you will be back when the may-fly dies?

II

Owen and Mary travelled North via Carlisle and Glasgow to Greenock, where they meant to pass the cold months till May, when they would embark on one of the ubiquitous Clyde passenger boats for Blairmore at the mouth of Loch Long: in July and August a holiday resort for Glasgow business men and their families, but in the earlier months a mere handful of cots and farms, held together by the empty, pretentious residences of the summer visitors. It was poor weather at Greenock for a pair of released lovers. They both prayed for the spring with identical fervour but differing reasons: Mary (who could have been enough absorbed in her emotions to forget the very existence of weather) because she knew Owen was bored and she couldn't get at him while the rain fell and smuts were on the tablecloth: Owen, because he was old enough and experienced enough to demand an appropriate setting for love, and Greenock, misty, windy, cheerless, was a setting to break the heart of any lover. They spent most of their time wandering about the quay-side,

watching the traffic go up and down the great Clyde highways: tramps and tugs by the dozen, of every sort and condition, private yachts attached to the C. Y. C., cruisers, torpedo boats, oil charters in great numbers: now and again a submarine would show its nose for a while among the general mess of craft, moored or moving, or a liner—this thrilled Mary most of all—would pass up by imperceptible movement, its colossal bulk ridiculously taken in charge by excitable little tugs, for all the world like black beetles trying to move a turtle. They also made excursions to Glasgow by train, whence they could see the skeleton vessels in the way all along Clydebank, and could also hear the ship-yard clank than which, at a distance, there is no more melancholy sound in the whole world. . . . Coming out of an eating-house in Sauchiehall Street one day, they ran full-tilt into the brown-haired man from the Guildhall. He stopped, lifted his hat, hesitated and seemed about to walk on, but Mary stepped forward.

"Let me introduce you to my husband," she said without a tremor. "I needn't tell you my new name because it hasn't changed! A case of cousinship, you see."

The man took Owen's hand in a limp clasp which betrayed his nationality, though his voice

was almost completely Anglicised. He explained that he travelled for a London firm of confectioners, and had to put in two or three days in Glasgow. "I'm the Scotch man: I'll have to give up my music pretty soon if they send me up here so often, Mrs. Gawne. I shan't run across you again——?"

Owen said curtly that they were only in for the day and he didn't add that their real headquarters were in Greenock. The fellow was visibly intrigued by Mary and he didn't like her tone towards him: it didn't seem nearly final or disinterested enough for an alleged married lady. Seeing his grumpiness, the brown-haired man, whose name, it appeared, was Heslop, took himself off very shortly. But the jealousy, a jealousy of unknown events, which Owen had felt at Olympia had revived at the sight of him, and he had to find something to vent his annoyance upon. Perversely, he pitched upon the very thing which ought to have appeased him.

"I say, Mary: you mustn't go about calling yourself Mrs. Gawne like that!" he exclaimed, as they prowled along under the lee of the solid, slate-blue buildings, so like, and yet so intrinsically differing from London city architecture. "You know, of course, we can't legally be married for six months after—after——"

"You needn't rub it in."

"Well, it's so silly and unnecessary. You'll be getting us horribly tied up one of these days. Your cousinship with me ought to be enough."

"Of course!" she scoffed. "People always believe that useful story! Even if it were true——"

"Well, what difference does it make, after all, what they will or won't believe?" he cried, with a gust of anger. "We *aren't* respectable, whatever lies we may make up to tell about ourselves."

"If you'd only come on the Continent as I wanted to, all this nuisance would have been avoided," Mary said, getting angry in her turn.

"Oh, the Continent! I hate the Continent. It's meretricious. It's cheap and nasty. I hate the sound of the word. It's full of people like ourselves, who can't look a good Briton in the face."

She had re-discovered his curious resentful distaste of any place outside his own country, or rather, near enough to his own country to suffer by comparison with it. Owen was more than insular: he was Diogenesic Martha, who knew that in the winter you went, if you belonged to polite society, to the South of France, or to Italy, or even to Switzerland for sporting reasons which did not, however, really appeal to her, had discovered this obstinacy in him a very long time ago.

They sat through a revival of *A Pair of Spectacles* at the King's almost without exchanging a word.

"I couldn't stand another winter in this dismal hole!" Owen exclaimed, shivering in the clammy Clyde's breath as they came out of the station at Greenock. "We'll have to see about a place in London somewhere, when everything's blown over. And there's the business, of course. I can't leave that entirely to run itself."

"Well, the Blairmore place'll do for a summer escape," she agreed. His little bungalow on the mountainside, far away up above the village, his father's only piece of property besides the house at Hastings, had seemed like a gift from God, or it might have been more appropriate to say from the devil who looks after such sinners, when it became necessary to find some "quiet place" where they might belong to each other without having to be either furtive or brazen. It had sounded nothing to take lodgings in Greenock during the few intervening months, until they could wander out on to their mountainside, Adam and Eve, having conquered the devil by accepting him, extraordinarily secure in their spring Eden. . . .

"You'll want to be in London, too," Mary continued, "if you're really going to do something about that home business."

"Well, I'll have to think about that. I must see where I stand over the alimony, you know."

"Don't give it up," she adjured him.

In the cheerful glow of their log fire she came to his knee for the usual fondling. She wanted her eyes kissed. She was always wanting to be kissed in unexpected places, but she liked it on her eyes best because of the delicious cold patch left there after the unusual warmth of his lips' touch. Owen had long ago discovered that, in spite of what all the poets say to the contrary, an eyelid is the softest part of the whole human body, and it was sweet to feel it throbbing and starting like a terrified bird, under his lips' imprisonment. Mary was rather like a bird herself: she had neither weight nor solidity, and he never knew when something of her was going to break. Mary gave herself with both hands, but consciously, and you could feel her own exquisite delight and wonder in her grace of giving, in her miraculous charm, which added itself on to your wonder and delight, enhancing it, and at the same time, by sharing it, somehow nullifying the pain which may lie in wondering and delighting. . . . Martha didn't know anything about the marvel and the agony of her own beauty, and she would love you in her sleep without thinking about it. Whenever the

memory of Martha came to Owen in those days it was accompanied by the thought of a drowsy caress, easy, content, maddeningly and agonisingly content.

III

On the fifth of April, encouraged by the golden weather, they went up to Blairmore. Mary, who had never been in rural Scotland before, was enchanted by it all: the palatial boat, the tiny, ridiculous wooden quay, and the rope-throwing, marvellously deft to an eye that hadn't seen it done half-a-dozen times a day for a lifetime, Loch Long's wild peaks stretching away to real, postcard blue in the distance, Gourock and Greenock suddenly transfigured into a beautiful, mist-wreathed frieze above the clear green of the Firth, and a bush of wild fuchsia which she found among the grass-scrabble on the beach.

"When the heather's out," said Owen, watching her eagerness, and thinking of Martha on a long-ago journey to Devonshire, "it will be perfect."

"It's perfect *now*."

It really was, when they had installed themselves in their lonely bungalow on the sheer side of the mountain, so complete a drop that Owen complained because Long wasn't deep enough for him

to take a header into it from his own house-door, without the bother of going through nettles and gorse in a bathing-dress to the beach. But it was excellent, on the warmest days, to lie out on that mountainside with only a bathing-dress between you and the X-rays of the sun, and no sound but the rush-tush-dribble of the stream: a real Scotch burn, that Mary called "bun" and Owen "burrun," and the natives something astonishing which made them both want to have hysterics. . . . They never could forget the fun they had over the hip-bath. This was, they found, the only means to cleanliness provided, so they dragged it into the bedroom, and Mary, with infinite labour, filled it with kettles from the stove, adding sufficient cold water out of her ewer to make it, she thought, comfortably warm. Owen, incautiously sat in it, and at once realised that it was but a few degrees removed from boiling point, but being unaccustomed to the use of hip-baths, he could not get out.

"Hell's blast! Mary, for God's sake come and lend me a hand, my skin's being taken off my body."

Mary watching his feet slide away outwards whenever he tried to get a purchase to rise, was nerveless and muscleless with laughter.

"Oh Jim, oh Harry, you do look so fun—fun—fun——"

She got hold of his hands at last to pull him up, but his feet slid at the fatal moment and he came down heavily, dragging her with him, on the edge of the bath, and, the double weight suddenly landing on this powerful lever, the whole thing arose and emptied its contents over both of them. Owen was pink as a hot poker by the time they were really on their feet, and Mary had to change to the skin.

"No wonder the Scotch are a hardy race," he said, later, looking down upon the meek bath with a ferocity which tenderly amused Mary.

"Oh, I expect this is a luxury. They wash in the loch probably. And I think we'd better do the same in future."

But the bathing was not really perfect, for they were too near the end of the loch to get real fresh water, too far to get real salt, and they also were presented with a good percentage of Clyde rabble, which came floating up on certain tides, leaving the water black and greasy and uninviting, though blue as a bead to look at from their eyrie a few hundred feet up. They found solace in the end on the loch instead of in it. Mary, whose long slip of a body could shoot through the water like a wire

through cheese, always overdid herself in her lust for speed, and one day she found herself halfway across the loch, Owen invisible, and a Clyde dredger, that sometimes lay up opposite their bungalow for a day, bearing down on her at a rate not great, but alarmingly implacable. After her long outward wrestle, she hadn't the strength to make a spurt to get well out of the dredger's course: her bobbing, capless head, she feared, was no more conspicuous than any porpoise or lump of seaweed, and she was resigning herself to being dredged up in company with the bottom of the loch when a dinghy appeared out of nowhere, and its occupant, a sun-burnt man of about forty, hauled her bodily into it out of danger. He had seen her, he explained, from his yacht, *Scowder*, and believing she had not sighted the dredger, had rowed round to see if he might come in handy.

"You've probably saved my life," said Mary, waving pacific signals to Owen, dancing on the shore.

"I've saved the dredger a nice mess-up of her gear, perhaps," he laughed.

"Ugh! You could smell her at Lochgoilhead!"

He watched her wringing out the lank hair over the side of the "pram": in between its brown, dripping strings he caught the gleam of the plain

gold ring which Owen had bought for her to save embarrassment until she could wear one which had been between church walls, and as he forced the flat, spoon-shaped prow over the water he thought that for a married girl she was singularly free from embarrassment.

"My husband's been having hysterics on the beach," she said presently, taking the plunge. "He can't stay in so long as I can, and I don't generally go out so far. You were really very opportune just now. But there's no need whatever for you to waste any more of your time. I can swim in perfectly easily from here."

He looked at her whimsically. "See if you can stand up, first."

Well, she could, but even accounting for the unsteady dinghy it wasn't a complete success, and she was not sorry to drop back on to her hard seat again, with a grimace of surprise, while he rowed on.

"That sort of turn affects highly strung people like yourself more strongly afterwards than you'd expect," remarked her preserver, picking his course, with the slightest motions of his head over his shoulder, straight as a die to the shivering Owen. "Better let me take you in comfortably."

She liked him to mark her down highly strung in that matter-of-fact manner.

"No trouble at all," the stranger was moved to declare brusquely, when they were all united on the sludgy shore, conscious, with some slight embarrassment, of the incongruity of their costumes. "My name's Richardson. You fond of yachting, sir?"

"My name's Gawne. Yes, immensely, but I've done practically none since I was at Canvey —er, before my marriage, and I had a little twelve-foot tub there. Yours runs well into twenty, I'd say."

"Twenty-two in all, but she's too heavy for her club." They all looked out to the great, white skeleton *Scowder*, flying the little triangle of the C. Y. C. "I do more cruising than racing: I like to live on my boat practically. Yes, I've been at Canvey, too, but you get the rough water there. Here it's nearly always as good as ice-sailing. You must come out with me some day if you will," he concluded, his keen brown eyes including Mary.

They did come, not once, but many times, and Mary, even more than Owen, who had his Canvey experience to live up to, revelled in those swift glidings from loch head to loch head: up the exquisite Loch Eck as full of unfathomable colour as

a sapphire in moonlight, under its deep shadows of pine and fir, ridge upon ridge of them mounting to the very sky: to Lochgoilhead: mile after mile up lovely Long, and even, later, down as far as Arran and Ailsa Craig, sliding out of the way of the Clyde passenger boats with a silent ease that was derision, almost insult, to their steam fussiness. Mary learnt the painful joys of yachtmanship then, and also the treachery of loch airs, that can whip up in a minute from a sagging sailful to a gust that drives the tiller back hard against the breast, with the strength of a maniac to get it back, and imminent danger all the time of sitting backwards into the sea. Richardson paid her the yachtman's greatest compliment, by disappearing into the tiny cabin to talk shop with Owen, leaving the *Scowder* and herself to take care of each other. Mary in reply made it her pride to sail a millimetre nearer the wind than she thought Richardson would credit her with, taking the little flag for her guide, and learning to the full the harassment of a ton-weight, iron-clamped tiller that must be moved an inch to left or right every third second, of a mainsail that always has in it a flap or a crease somewhere, and hovers perpetually upon the wrong side of the wind, whence it must be recalled with shame and a cracking hand and terror lest Richard-

son could come up out of his glory-hole to rebuke her. . . . "I never have you to myself nowadays," Owen suddenly complained one day in early June, knocking the bottom out of Mary's fantastic happiness with a crash.

"Oh, Owen! Didn't we lie out on the grass together all the afternoon yesterday?"

"Yes, and you couldn't take your eyes off what the *Scowder* was doing."

She sat up, stung out of laziness by his tone, and, taking his reluctant chin firmly into her fist, proceeded to make a close examination of his face. "Owen dear, are you just grumpy or have you really got dirt in your head?"

"My head's tolerably clean, I believe."

"Don't be a fool, Owen, you know perfectly what I mean."

"Does Richardson, I wonder?"

She let his chin go with an exclamation of disgust. "Is *that* why you're always so boorish when we're with him?"

"I hate the way he monopolises you, confound him."

"You stupid fool," she exclaimed, angrily. "The man's over forty."

"Oh, a man of any age can be interesting, if he's new."

Mary was so angry that she had to be silent for a moment, but in the interval she was able to discern the bitterness beneath his face of contempt, and to meet it her tenderness came uppermost.

"Owen, dear heart, you *must* learn, to—to let other men *look* at me . . ."

"That's just it," he said, gloomily, "they all look at you too much."

"Well, I don't know from Adam why they should. You know as well as I do that I'm not a bit pretty."

"I've heard people accused of living on charm before now. You do that."

"Living on charm?"

"On the something in you that men can't resist, something that's deeper and a hundred times more seductive than looks. . . . You put forth your personality, you put it on as another woman would put on her gew-gaws, and it shrivels people up. . . . Some women's entities are simply naked fire."

She leaned towards him with eyes full of excitement: excitement in spite of herself, he thought.

"Is *mine* like that?"

"When you choose to *make* it naked."

"That sounds beastly, Owen."

"It is. But ravishingly beastly."

"What a cold, foul pig you are," she said, drawing away from him with displeasure. "I suppose you feel you've the right to talk to me in this bawdry way because of—of certain things I've told you about myself. . . . It's brutal to add shame to shame."

His temper was instantly broken. "Darling little Mary, little sweet body, you mustn't take any notice of my grumblings. . . . Don't you see, can't you understand how insecure I am with you while all this miserable business is dragging along? Anybody's only got to whistle for you and I couldn't raise one finger to keep you. Don't you see that?"

She thought with bitterness how true it was that anybody had only got to whistle for her, and there was no one who must raise a finger to keep her. . . . Everybody wasn't so sure of her man as Ann-Veronica and all those heroic plungers of fiction. Thurston's *Sally Bishop* was much nearer the mark. But, whatever had happened to them all, she had Owen at her feet now. She turned and took his head in her long arms. "We'll be married the very second they'll let us."

Owen thought in the night, feeling the dead weight of Mary's unconscious head on his arm: "Sin is infection. Do as the next man does. 'Do

unto others as you know they would do unto you' . . . Something of our position must show through, as Mary's fire shows through, to every man and woman who sees us together. In some unknown way these things are revealed.

"Every man and woman will know that we are fair game——

"Sin is infection. Every man who knows what I have done with Mary will begin to think what he, too, could do with her.

"Really and truly, to the end of our lives we shall never be safe."

IV

In September the news came that the decree nisi had been pronounced, and May saw them once more in London, man and wife in the sight of the law, tentatively ensconed in a newish, well-to-do quarter of Wimbledon, where they hoped they might still "belong to each other," as Mary had said, "without having to be either furtive or brazen."

Mary thought it was ridiculous to settle so near Richmond, seat of all their trouble, but Owen, who had in full the sensitive mind's hatred of sinister old London, insisted that it was the only

decent suburb in the metropolis, except Ealing, which was still more dangerous, and anyhow it should all have blown over by now. If you had only enough money, everything always blew over.

CHAPTER V

I

In his heart Owen had laid aside the great home-for-writers scheme into which his wife continued to pour her enthusiasm, thought to tell her that he had definitely abandoned it also went beyond his intention. But he hated the thought of charity in bulk: his damages had been severe and left a considerably smaller margin for large philanthropical enterprise, and there were now no gaps in his life—Mary had filled them all. His honeymoon with Mary had lasted ever so much longer than his honeymoon with Martha. Mary was of the stuff that realises the duration of a honeymoon is not determined by a stated number of days, weeks, or months. But she knew, also, that love, like human beings, cannot live long on nothing. She made love to him every single minute of the time, with her eyes, with the touches of her hands, with her quick, bright, fantastic tongue and with the turns and motions of her person. There was very little peace about Mary. Always, when they had

rounded off these swift, bird-like challenges into (he thought) the quiet and cosy intimacy of happy married people, flip! with a flutter of her wings Mary would be gone again, out of his grasp, and there was all the sweet to do of winning her to him again. He loved it, but in time it wore him out. Mary could keep it up because it was natural, it was no effort, but Owen realised all the time that he was only following where she led him, and infinitely fatigued in the following.

"You never make love to *me*," Mary protested one day, with one of her rare franknesses. She knew better than most people how live love must be contained within wrappings, kept from light or touch as a photographic negative must be kept:

> By a phantom thread retained
> Lightly forfeit, hardly gained
> Fugitive upon a breath—
> By a light word done to death.

It was a rare thing for Mary to take the name of love openly upon her lips, though her whole body spoke it all day long.

"Don't I? What's this—and this—and this, then?" He jabbed kisses like small blows on her small brown head, ending up with her mouth.

"That is sweet, but it was only because I as good

as asked for it. And all men can love with their bodies, most of them in spite of themselves."

"I don't ever do that, Mary," he exclaimed nettled.

She retorted: "I often wish you would!"

"Apparently you don't know what you do want."

"That's the married man's answer all over. . . . I can't help it, Owen, that I'm one of the women who must always be flirted with, up to the end of their lives, whether they marry or whether they do not. I can quite believe that *you've* never flirted in your life. You've gone straight for the winning-post. And *then* it doesn't matter any more. . . . I could shake you sometimes, Owen, for your beastly, sluggard content in being married to me. That you could be content to love me after having been in love with me!"

He made a silly picture, she thought, in the middle of her resentment, standing there staring at her with his silly great male face all awry with surprise, his hair ruffled from their little encounter.

"That's where I'm such a fool, such a half-and-half," she exclaimed bitterly. "I've got all the instincts of the coquette, without the coquette's

power of repression that brings her what she needs. If I never made *you* any advances——"

"That wouldn't be any better, Mary," he told her, with quiet conviction. He realised suddenly, watching her real resentment flame and fade, flame and fade, that Martha and age together had irrevocably spoiled him for the sort of love-making Mary needed. It was a disgusting thought, but it was true that he was too old, or too settled, or both, to become a pursuer of anything except young pink and white prettiness such as Mary couldn't pretend to. Mary had come at the wrong end of his life. At some time in those impassionate years with Martha his intellect had gone past love, and taken the fierceness of love, such as Mary demanded of him, with it. . . . Mary was such a child, too, but without the innocence of the helplessness of a child, and so he couldn't forgive her her childishness. She was a shocking bad housekeeper: that, thank goodness, wasn't fatal in the sort of establishment they kept up, but he did wish she were sometimes punctual to meals. She also rambled on the brink of slovenliness with her clothes. She was careless and she didn't think about them a bit.

"Martha once said to me that dressing themselves was among the natural sensations of

women," he told her. "'Who can tell?" she said, "the passionate joy a woman can find in a new blouse, a becoming frock?'"

"Martha was always very beautifully dressed," Mary agreed, evenly.

He didn't know how he could go on from that, and the opportunity slipped by.

Another young habit of Mary's which jarred on him sorely was that of a little promiscuous swearing. It was nothing very bad, and he didn't think about it in private, but he had the full man's hatred of having attention focussed upon him through the indiscretion of his wife, and Mary's little oaths were not always inaudible in public. The climax came at the theatre one night, when her box of chocolates slipped from her knee, deluging the floor with its contents, and Mary's "damn!" of disgust could be heard four rows back. Owen was furious, and when they got home read her a lecture, too full of his grievance to find the mirth which Mary hid behind the straight line of her lips. At the end she turned to him with the beatific smile of a young Innocent, laid her head against his shoulder, and, gazing up into his eyes, whispered, soft as a bird's first twitter, but also as clear: "Damn!"

Owen turned away from her roughly. "Mary, curse you, what a child you are!"

"Well, do you want me to be so old?"

"No, only decently behaved."

"I left all that behind when I ran away with you," she retorted. "I suppose that sort of thing *is* bound to have a bad effect, sooner or later. Everybody says so."

That was how she always worsted him.

II

Owen was an habitué of the "Old Cock" in Fleet Street. Perversely, relieved of Martha's spurrings, he had paid more attention to his business of late, partly, also, as a result of his long holiday, and it was nothing strange for him then to spend two or three mornings a week at the office. Sparing Mary, and himself, as much as possible, he always lunched in town upon these occasions, and the literary atmosphere of the famous pressman's resort fascinated him. One day, lunching late, his own particular table was invaded by a tall and seedy-looking individual, bearing a portfolio of ancient appearance, from which he proceeded to take and spread about the table an immense number of manuscript pages, covering all his own place and more than half of Owen's with the litter. Owen endured it un-

moved till his own meal arrived, when to relieve the waiter he was obliged to break into his vis-à-vis' apparent absorption.

The man was at once apologetic, lifting a cadaverous brown face stabbed with deep-set hazel eyes. "This stuff takes hold of one so, I forget where I am." His voice had the ugly, husky twang of the Colonial: his thick, burnt skin and the glassiness of the eyes ruled him out of Europe, and Owen experienced that enlarged sense of nationality which first-hand intercourse with foreigners always evokes.

"Your own?" he asked, easily.

The eyes in their deep brown pits took on life and movement at once. "A three-act serio: it ought to be a oner: I've been on it for seven months and it's pretty well played me out." His voice could not contradict his face as he asked, with elaborate mimicry of Owen's tone: "You interested, by any chance?"

Owen stiffened. "As a reader, no more."

The manuscript piles went back into their portfolio with comical celerity. "That's another lunch wasted, then." He looked across with humorous defiance. "I'm not so rolling that I can lunch here for a whimsy. You can guess *that* probably, I expect I look it."

He looked it, but he spoke King's English, though he spoke it through a throat full of husks, and Owen asked, against his British will: "What d'you mean, another lunch wasted?"

"Well, I've nothing to get from you, that's clear. . . . You needn't be afraid your table will be troubled any more. As a matter of fact, these people are getting wise to me, and I'll have to find another place to call pretty soon. . . . My name's Messervy, Francis Henry Messervy: that and my age, which I don't know, seem to be about all I've got that belongs to me in this world." He looked at Owen with the sweet smile which drew light down into his eyes, changing them as completely as the sea is changed by dusk or dawn or darkness. "My brains I've mostly spat out into this," he nodded at the old case, "quick, before they began to decompose. . . . Some old huckster or other takes all of my body he can get. He doesn't get much but the flesh on it. You, and I suppose by now a few score delicatessen hog-eaters like yourself, can divide up among you what sense of dignity and worth there is left. . . . Excuse me. I find it extraordinarily difficult, these last months, to remember when and whether I'm using a tongue or a fountain-pen. The plain facts are these. I've written a play, I'm hung up

for money, and I've got to rely on chance to get someone to take it up, or me up, it doesn't matter which. So I buzz round, and whenever I've got the price of it I come in and dine here and make a nuisance of myself in the hope that some day somebody useful will notice me. It's a pretty little scheme, isn't it? I've staked a bad egg on you, of course." He leaned forward and said, irritably: "If I'd been a few years earlier I'd have roped in Northcliffe. *He* was the stuff. . . . But he's gone along too far now. He can afford to give himself airs and patronise the obvious."

Owen asked: "What's the matter with submitting the stuff, anyway?"

Messervy made an impatient movement. "Oh, I'm not afraid of rogues and swindlers. That's all gammon these days. Probably, in the end, some agency will get its dirty little ten per cent out of me. But this play business is only the catch-penny; you've probably realised that. I'm worth something, and somebody's got to have me. Somebody's *got* to make me into a big man. And somebody's got to feed and clothe me while they're doing it."

"You're not English," said Owen.

"God knows what I am! A few dozen countries know what I'm *not*. I worked across to here

in a tan boat. Yar! I can smell tan in this roll here, now."

"Why come here? Your scheme's the most completely Yankee article I've ever examined."

The cosmopolitan shrugged his shoulders. "Why is the name of Fleet Street famous all over the world? I suppose I'd been told the tale like all the rest."

"Farringdon Street is nearer that nowadays."

"Yes! There's a real news office for you!" His face lit up. "Queer, that only the new erections satisfy one's preconceptions of the old. But that's where you people get the rest of the world whacked: I don't say you know it, but you do. It's the disappointment of Fleet Street that's its wonder, not the satisfaction. In America, for instance, we've got the glass doors, the lifts, the sky-signs, the hustle, all that we know to be, all that we hope to see. Here, there's not a single conception realised. There's no other literary centre in the world can give its habitates the great, big, heavenly heart-ache that Fleet Street in London can give to you."

Owen, unaffected by this hymn to the bitter-sweets of Fleet Street, had sat with Mary's face opposite him, making up his mind. He said, in the end, painfully: "If a few things hadn't hap-

pened in my life that it might have been better not to happen, there ought not by now to have been any need for you to hang around Fleet Street eating-houses, bothering people and getting bitter about Northcliffe. . . . But that's a long story which I don't propose to go into. . . . I've the right to say this much, I think, that your lunch may not have been so wasted as you think."

Messervy leaned forward, with his teeth, good, white teeth, glinting over the edge of his lip. "One moment, sir. I ought to tell you, I've been right on the wheel, pretty well night and day, these seven months past. All the nerves, and most of the temper and tolerance, I think, 've been strained out of me, and what's left is fairly thick dregs." He explained, in answer to Owen's look: "I'm in no sort of condition to take any hankey-pankey disappointment prettily, that's all, and I'm not a nice creature to live with just now, either."

"That's all right. I wasn't proposing to live with you. But there *are* certain things I could do for you, can do for you: certain things I probably will do——"

They sat till after three discussing the certain things that Owen could do for Francis Henry Messervy, when the waiter politely hinted them

out, and Owen went home to tell Mary that his protégé was found and his second-hand literary fame assured.

III

On a blood hot evening in July, Mary came flying into his study with head-long desperate skirts swinging around her and a face as white as the paint on his lintel.

"Owen! *When* . . . I'm going to have a baby!"

Her voice cracked before it could become a mere yell of terror: she gesticulated at him with flying, damp hands, and the tears fell down on her blouse.

"My darling! What an exquisite thing!"

"Exquisite! It's terrible."

"Terrible!"

"My good man, it's all very well for *you*. . . . I wonder how many women in the world 've committed infanticide without meaning to, just out of dread? Or worse. . . . All this birth and growth business is filthy: filthy, filthy. Pain is filthy. A woman like this is a foul thing, nothing but a great lump of beastly instincts. Her soul's uncovered. We might as well uncover our bodies

too and go naked: precious little else is hid. . . . And I *won't* be mucked about with chloroform and filth——"

He wanted to smack her, to shut her up for being the worst kind of coward, and degraded at that, but he knew that wouldn't do. Henceforward, and on to the end, Mary must be Mary, and Mary only, the comparative instinct must be smothered, her entity alone must be allowed to exist until, in the act of passing itself on, it had accomplished its work in the world. Putting his foot on his mental repulsion, he took her in his arms, soothing her as best he could. "Little sweet idiot, little odd-heart, the silly nonsense you've been piling up inside this empty head. . . . If you'd only come to *me*. Mary! Old fools and novelists like to pile it on about the agony of child-birth. I'd wring their necks! My dear child, I can tell you this: science has come to such a wonderful pass that, if a doctor knows his job, nowadays there's no need, not the slightest need in the world, little Mary body, for a woman to suffer at such a time." . . . He said, with anger: "I'd tell that to some of these growing girls, poor terrified souls, instead of all the doctor muck about their complexions and their insides, what they should do, what they *shouldn't*."

Mary, easily frightened, was also easily calmed, and he thought, watching a healthy interest beginning to break through her panic: "Curiosity plays weird tricks with human timidities. She'll be on fire with it in a fortnight." And he had leisure to examine his own emotions, which were more lively than he had bargained for. The thought of a small Mary, containing within her tininess the whole germ of that frenzied essence of life which he could adore in the first Mary, was something that took him in the small of his soul as the thought of Tubby had never taken him. Tubby, sweet, fat, placid. . . . Mary's child would have long, flower-like limbs, and all the unfathomable mysteries of the universe would lie, like marvels descried at the bottom of a pool, in her eyes. . . . Incidentally, it was very awkward that Mary should be in this state just now, when his thought and interest were full up with Messervy. Messervy, for a time, would have to go to the wall. After due consultation with Mary, who had shown considerable excitement over the "find," he had taken a couple of rooms in Hammersmith for his protégé, and there, with complete freedom, a full stomach, and occasional visits from Owen, Messervy laboured to make fame for himself and his benefactor. The "three-act serio"

was undergoing that revision which improved health and freedom from worry had found to be necessary, and there was also a collection of verses in the air. Owen, Mary said, fussed round Francis Henry like a hen with one chick, and cawed about him to everyone he met. Mary prided herself upon keeping aloof from the fussiness, but it was she, strangely enough, who discovered Messervy to be tying himself into internal knots of appalling complication with indigestion, through the irregular meals he took. Thenceforward she took the matter and the landlady into her own hands and ordained breakfast, dinner, and tea, and a stated hour for each from which nothing short of a final act should cause the playwright to deviate.

"But," said Messervy, his hidden eyes alight, "what you don't understand, Mrs. Gawne, is that when we're keyed up to our work we *can't* eat, or sleep for that matter, and when we're not we can't do any decent work. Eating and sleeping have got to be matters of chance, and of secondary importance, with idiots like myself, who can't keep away from a pen."

"They've got to be nothing of the sort," Mary replied with decision. "My husband at one *time* was one of these same idiots. But he wasn't

allowed to drop off for the night at breakfast time, nor eat welsh rare-bits and olives in the small hours. Hence, he still lives."

"Hence he doesn't still write," Messervy dared her.

"To your advantage!" she spat at him. Characteristically, all the maternal instincts rousing up and getting to work within her at that time went straight to Owen. She knew perfectly well that hers was the earliest type of all, which turns to its mate before and after its offspring, and, sub-consciously, in the in-between times as well. But, all the same, they were trying months for Owen. He felt the full force of her rages, as of her tenderness, and at times was fain to grit his teeth and retire into a corner to wonder at Nature. You could feel Mary's temper feeding itself, getting on its proud hind-legs, beginning to lay back its ears, to snarl, to show its teeth: then, crash! it was upon you, and at times not even the tiny, immateriate Mary dimly distinguishable behind it all could save them from a brawl, vulgar and noisy and real, infinitely more real, somehow, than anything he remembered with Martha. . . . Messervy alone, of all their intimates, was kept in close ignorance of these occurrences, and Owen had the uncomfortable conviction that what he did not see or hear

he sensed more clearly and identically than all the rest.

Messervy dined with them once a week now, to report progress. For a long time he had refused to come to the house as an official guest, and at the last Owen discovered that the reason was because he did not possess a dress suit and pumps. The price of these, and even an old outfit of Owen's were alike refused with cast-iron politeness by Francis Henry. "If I come to your house at all I must come on my own legs," he said, enigmatically, and refused to be cajoled. Owen knew it was because he would not sit beneath Mary's charity. Later, the suit and pumps were legitimately forthcoming, and a Messervy of grace and splendour sat with them at meat, turning the globe around for their benefit, and holding Mary with those hidden eyes of his, Mary whose wings no man could bind, least of all Owen. . . . He thought, as he watched them, seeing the soft light from the centre settle on their foreheads and fly again, as they moved this way and that, how well-matched they were, with their long, keen faces, bodies like straight trees, the frenzy of them they exposed as they moved and looked and talked——

"Wyndham's people have got a new thing," Messervy said to Owen over the dessert, cracking

Mary's walnuts for her in the brown vice of his locked fingers. "I'm sorry: I hoped to have got mine in in time to tempt them."

"Wyndham's stuff is all *good*," Mary said.

"Good right through and original at least once in a century. That's something to say of any theatre nowadays."

"You people all miss the point." Owen's walnut went through with a crash, the dry kernel powdered the cloth, and a point entered his soft thumb. "People only asked to be amused nowadays. You say that's bad and loose. But what's the standard of bad and good nowadays? The world's its own criterion."

"Not at all. Each one of us is his own criterion."

Owen's thumb was hurting horribly. "Just so. Very few persons can realise how little they are individually, but how unconsciously great as units of a great multitude. In the end, Messervy, in the long run, it's the mass that matters."

"The mass doesn't matter at all, sir. . . . Really and truly, down on the dead level, there's no such thing. Anything that hurts me, that hurts my individuality, such a thing as death to me, my personal me, would matter. And the same applies to you. To Mrs. Gawne here. But

if you think in terms of the mass, you'll know, sooner or later, that nothing matters at all." He turned the gleam of his eyes on to Mary. "After all, God made us individual, with personal bodies, with personal brains. Intensely personal souls."

Owen said, with a movement of disgust; "You'd make us intensely personal swine. . . . That creed rules out every kindly and lovely human thought, every impulse, every emotion."

He couldn't be untouched by the simple sweetness of Messervy's look, as he leaned his long, black arms on the table and said, so low that the husk in his voice became naturalised; "It doesn't rule out love. And the greater include the less. Love includes all these things.

"Love, before earth, heaven or hell, is personal. . . ."

. . . . . .

As they stood, later, to watch their guest down the drive, Mary's dog, a thick-set, clumsy bull-terrier of more passion than manners, hurled himself violently out of the darkness upon his mistress. "Get *down*, you bloody bow-wow," Mary said in her ringing voice, dispassionately warding off the animal. Owen, all the irritation that the evening

had gathered in him suddenly in flood, took a long step forward and caught her hard at the shoulder. "Mary, *stop* it! I forbid you to use such foul language. Everyone in the house could hear you." (He meant "Messervy must have heard you.")

She said, staring at him coldly: "You dumb cassocker, you don't know the difference between foul language and a little artistic swearing. If I'd called *you* bloody in a temper, you might have had some justice. . . . Gently, mind my blouse, you hell-hound. . . . Don't be such an idiot, Owen; swearing's all a matter of the mood and the meaning, you know that perfectly well." She said a moment later, with complete change of tone: "And please remember I'm bearing your child and take your great fat arm away."

He knew she was not in the mood for any emotional approach, and, indeed, in some indefinable, upside down way, softness had gone out of her lately; her passion was fiercer, harder than ever—too hard, too fierce for a woman, he thought, and in the between times she was harsh, acrid almost, caustic. . . . Caustic. Coarsetick. Well, she *was* a coarse tick, with her bloodys and her hells. "You're a coarse tick, Mary," he said to the empty hall suddenly, and then he pulled himself out of

that sort of thought with a jerk, and gently set himself to bolting up the doors for the night. It was true enough; at this very moment, beneath the lean, angry lines of her skinny body, Mary was bearing his child.

CHAPTER VI

I

MESSERVY'S serio-comedy, revised beyond all recognition, was put on at Prince's in October, with instant success; a long run seemed assured, and Messervy, lank and unmoved as ever, received something as near an ovation as the present-day insipid London audience can produce. Two days later Mary had a miscarriage, the origin of which seemed obscure. Mary herself couldn't or wouldn't tell an obstinately inquisitive specialist of any cause for worry or anxiety, and Owen, between haziness upon medical matters and loyalty to his wife, didn't like to suggest Mary's incredible rages as a possible source of trouble. The physical difficulty passed, but the rages did not, though they modified, and Owen came near again to the stage where a man looks at his life and has an impulse towards the eraser. He could not have believed that two people could lead—and continue to lead, therein lay the wonder—a life of such emotional intensity, emotional in all

senses of the word, good and bad horribly, fantastically mixed. . . . There were no halves about Mary. She did everything with passion, hated him and loved him, went from him and came back to him, all on the same exalted plane, and he, perforce, must be for ever picking up his comfortable soul and climbing after her again into that furious, high-flown existence that she would not quit. "I love you, Mary, but I don't like you," he said to her after one of their big rows, and instead of flying at him she contemplated him calmly and said, in her strange way: "I wonder why men expect so much? Even *I* knew I wouldn't get that."

"Get what?"

"Oh, the cat-and-dog liking that makes the double life comfy and oily and pretty. . . . *I* knew that wouldn't do for me, I'd have to have the other that means hell just as much as it means heaven. But I wasn't a fool as to expect both rolled into one."

Owen sat in his study beneath a portrait of Messervy taken in his author's box on that famous first night, and wondered. Had Martha been "comfy and oily and pretty?" And, more poignant still, to which of these two lives that Mary so calmly and definitely separated, each from the

other, did his inmost soul belong? Mary's fierceness, Mary's bright and burnished romance in the end would claim him, that he knew. . . . But then he realised, with a jolt and a revolt, that lately, and increasingly, there had been moments, sometimes whole hours and nights and days, when the thought of Martha and Martha's loss could have brought big tears of self-pity rolling down his cheeks, so completely had Mary worn him out. Inmost souls were not the only thing that counted in this life. . . . Bodies counted a lot, they counted horribly. He knew his body hadn't been well for weeks. Loathsome ferments tormented him in his stomach after every meal; his memory was going, and when he lay down to sleep at night he knew he must count and regulate every breath or his heart would stop and fall right out through his bowels. Mary, the coarse little tick, slept almost at once, and often snored. She didn't know the condition he was in, she didn't care: if she cared, she would not know what to do for him. And the thought of doctors made him physically sick.

Messervy, with his eternal brilliance, his sword of a brain that went through Owen's weariness like a snake's tooth through leather, was wearing him out too. . . .

II

Mary, who could withstand sickness and hunger no better than most people, in December sent for Messervy to dine with her alone, making sure, with the cunning of her type, that nothing in time or circumstances might be lacking, should the little gods prove themselves to be wide awake. She dressed herself in black, and, while she waited for Messervy, walked up and down the drawing-room with her skirts held up, admiring in the pier-glass her musical-comedy legs, more perfect than ever beneath the vertical grain of the black silk. She didn't know, exactly, what she wanted the evening to bring forth, but she was sharply, unbearably aware of a blank that had to be filled, and she knew she wanted again to be held, pinned by Messervy's deep eyes, without the consciousness of Owen there, ready at any moment to release her. . . . Messervy was a god in evening dress. She had known and marked that, that first evening when he sat with them at meat in his crackling new suit, and kept her thoughts from charity by some psychic strength in him that she dared not resist. She loved the low moan of his voice out in the hall, following the little, high, stirring murmur of the maid's, as she took his things. Messervy held,

Mary knew well enough, a position with both servants that Owen could not command.

"I didn't expect you'd come," she said, as he slipped across the room to her. "It was fearfully short notice."

"As a matter of fact I've been expecting this. I've kept days open for it."

"Well, I certainly haven't," she retorted, bound to keep her end up. "It was quite on a moment's impulse, I can assure you."

"Of course. You're a married woman."

She didn't in the least understand what he meant, but she thrilled as she knew he meant her to do.

It was like Messervy to plunge straight into the weird, the unexpected, the intimate. . . . Owen would have made up yards about the weather and waited for a dark corner. Owen was the wrong sort of opportunist. . . . and Messervy made his own opportunities. Nevertheless, they sat stolidly enough through the meal itself, and even after the meal in the drawing-room, until the man suddenly asked for music, and Mary knew at the same moment that she was pinned as she had longed and feared to be; stabbed through her soul and held twirling on his gaze as surely as any butterfly on the naturalist's pin. She had had

in her head all day a wild, exalted thing called "Sea Dream"; it made her feel feverish and she wanted to push it out by playing something simpler; she would wander through a nocturne, she thought, or Friml's sweet "Crepuscule," but immediately her fingers came on to the cold keys she knew it must be wildness, and she knew also that without word, look, or gesture, Messervy had so commanded her. All the same, she made a horrible mess of "Sea Dream," her hands flew about the piano apparently independently of her brain, she had violent intrigues among the black notes, and her octaves were a plain hash.

"It's no use," she called to him across the hearthrug. "I can't play all this flurry stuff tonight, there's too much flurry in my head, and I'm sure you don't want to hear 'Sweet and Low' and 'Songs Without Words.' . . . If you'd sing something, though——"

"I'll sing a duet with you. What have you got?"

She hated his rudeness and his assurance, but too well, also, she was aware that he couldn't be anything else but rude and assured, since he was Messervy. He was all in tune, all in tune.

They sang "Come Sing to Me" and the Hoffman duet together, and then Messervy raked out

three little German miniatures that fascinated them, and they sang these over and over again, with increasing beauty, and the swaying of the notes, guided and sent swinging along by his voice, was, Mary felt, almost as good as dancing, and indeed she felt herself caught up into a physical unity of movement with him that only dancing could compare, the light, warm, rhythmic ecstasy of it. . . . Messervy wasn't there on the last note of the third rendering, and when she broke her own note off short to look round for him she found her neck was met at each side, half-way across its turn, by his iron hand, and then, gradually, prevented altogether from movement by the gentle closing of those hands about her bare throat. As surely as if Owen had still been there, watching, resenting, she stood up, breaking, with the softness of her fingers, the iron of his. Mary had not been properly married for over a year for nothing.

"Why not?" he asked, as if she had spoken, calmly.

She didn't like this cool way of love-making, and she flounced at him: "Perhaps you've forgotten, you yourself told me I was a married woman, this very evening."

"Oh," he cried, impatient, as if she were a child

persisting in some obvious lie, "all that nonsense! You're no more married than I am."

She thought for one awful moment that he had the divorce in his mind, and set her teeth, but he went on in his adorable voice: "Look here, you see I'm not going to tell a lot of primitive muck to you; there's a lot of rubbish about the law of mates and so on, but we know all there is to know about that. . . . I want you to understand, though, that you and I can't afford to play any tricks with each other." He put out his hand took hold of her arm; as plainly as if she had touched the naked wire, she could feel current rush up her arm and spread into her body, suffusing it. . . . "If I were to put my arm round your waist now, or touch your lips with mine, you'd probably nearly faint. D'you know why that is?"

She not so much nodded her head as shuddered, feeling that the faintness was not so far off, as it was.

"That's sex. . . . Sex is a rude word, isn't it? But some people say it's a rude emotion. . . . You and I, you see, happen to be rather unusually fully charged with this highly explosive matter, emotion, whatever you like to call it. More fully, for instance, than your husband. . . . And so, of course, before we light any

fires . . . before I put my arm round your waist, *so*, or touch this little odd, hammering mouth, *so*, we've got to be pretty sure——"

Mary said, out of her clangours, faintly: "Sure of what?"

"Well, that this . . . and other sorts of things . . . are worth doing. One's got to have a sort of basis——"

"I don't know anything about you," Mary began, desperately. "I don't know a bit whether I like you . . . that *liking* business, you know. . . . I know you drive me to distraction, that's all."

Messervy's case-hardened arms tightened. "Poor little blood-and-fire. . . . As for liking, that's generally a thing one has to thrash out later. But there's this much I think I ought to tell you. You knowing as well as I do how there's things one knows one leaves behind, and things one isn't sure about. . . . Before I started this God-forsaken knock-about life—well, the sort of thing your husband's pulled me out of, I haven't yet forgotten that I was—don't laugh—a minister of God. An English clergyman in an English country village. Well, I was brought up to it. My father's profession. . . . My father, I believe, 's living still.

"One after the other, I was chucked out of three decent little livings. At first, with excuses, you know, and suggestions of a more suitable parish elsewhere, wider responsibilities, and so on. At the end, openly, or as openly as they ever do these moral kick-outs in the Church, with a pretty shower of public and anonymous abuse to help me on my way. I had, of course, to chuck the Cloth altogether, I knew by then it was no good. And, you know, at that time I was most unconsciously sorry.

"The reason was——"

He sat Mary down on a chair suddenly, and stood in front of her, looking at her gravely, but making no attempt to hold her with his eyes as she knew he could and would at will.

"The trouble was that I couldn't leave the young girls of my parishes alone."

He said, with a grave kindliness that removed him æons from her and from the Messervy who guiltily loved her; more and more easily she was coming to trace the priest in him: "That sort of thing goes on a great deal more than you and many other people realise, of course; the Church isn't really down enough on it. At least, it isn't sharp enough to catch us out. . . . Lots of opportunities come the way of a clergyman that the

average business man doesn't get. And if a man isn't made of stone. . . . Confirmation classes, private interviews, sick visits, confessionals, even. . . . I'm not excusing the filthy business, don't for Christ's sake think that, I'm only showing you how it can be done, how easily it can be done.

"Well, that sort of thing, you see, is pretty serious, people won't condone it, and quite right too. Where *you* come in. . . . For a parson, you see, it's a most deadly business, you can understand that. For a budding young buck, such as I became when the Church kicked me out, it doesn't matter. But when there's going to be a woman tacked on, there's going to be trouble again if one isn't mighty careful. And you'll always find, where the barrier is, there the temptation is strongest. *You* might be to me—now—what the Church, my Bishop, the goodwill of my parish, my livelihood, were to me then. The stumbling block to a good time that one craves to get over."

Mary rose from her chair of judgment and set herself up close against him, so close that he had to bend backwards from the hips to avoid touching her.

"There's filth in all this you've told me," she began in a shaky voice, "and there's pathos, and, in a way, because I love you, there's sweetness.

. . . What I want to say is, and I don't know what, in saying it, I may be doing; whatever it is, I believe—I am sure, I can match it.

"That I *have* matched it——"

III

"You know," Mary said later, "one talks and does in this sweet way, and it's heaven, but—as a matter of fact—I'm married to Owen!"

"Of course. That's where you've got to leave things to me."

"To you!"

"Well. Onlookers see the most of the game, you know. And somehow, between now and—our limit—this onlooker's got to find out how the game goes, whether to us, or to him——"

"Are you certain that I don't love Owen?" she asked, "because I'm not."

Messervy looked at her. She knew in a minute she would be twirling on that pin again, and all clear thought or consciousness blotted out by its red passage through her brain. "Don't do that," she said, uneasily, and then, as he dropped his eyes: "I know it's clever and makes you feel like God, but I asked you a plain question. Be *fair*."

Messervy began, slowly: "Love, initial love, is not a thing in itself, a blind passion which comes and goes for no reason. Love is made up of a thousand minute circumstances, traits, tastes, all manner of little things piled up on each other; topheavy, and at any second another thoughtlessly added may topple all the others down."

"I don't believe it," Mary said, stoutly, and quoted:

> "Love blows as the wind blows;
> Blows, and what reckoning shows
> The courses of his chart?

"And anyway, that creed rules *us* out."

"We were never in. . . . Dear, don't look so sweetly tragic. That piled-up business, we haven't come to it yet. We've got to do our piling up. And that was why I said one had to have a basis. . . . But you and your husband, you're right along the other end of the line." His eyes began to sparkle, he was in love with his own words again as she had seen him over and over again, at their own dinner-table, sprawling among his work in his rooms, even sometimes in the middle of his own speech at public functions. "I could draw a lovely little picture of that business: you and Gawne sitting above space at the end of the marriage pole, waiting for him to give

you that last little push that 'ud send you whirling off into my arms. . . . Mary, dear, I hope he'll push you soon!"

"Hush!" she stopped him. "Owen's a good man."

"I know. And you and I dirty animals—they'll say. But—God made the beasts first."

The burn of his last kiss hadn't stopped smarting when he turned, in his long ulster, with his black hair green, like shabby black cloth, in the moonlight, to say: "I wonder why we writers are all such swine? All the beauty and purity of us seems to go into our art, and we're left, just the vile maggoty, feverish little husks. . . . Mary, darling, I do beseech you, never have anything to do with a writer. Every one of them has a maggot in his soul, every one."

She didn't know in the least whether he was serious or not, but she said, laughing: "If I want a maggot for a pet I'll have one and no one shall stop me. . . . Dear, don't you know it's other people's personalities keep us alive, not our own? *We* can't come to any harm."

"There isn't any harm in the world you couldn't come to," and immediately the shadows had swallowed him up.

Mary went slowly back into the house, feeling

as if, weeks ago, her body had died and been buried, and her soul still hanging in space, waiting its resurrection.

IV

Owen lumbered happily about the bathroom, which adjoined their bedroom: by careful and gradual dispensation about it of his various articles of toilet he had made it his, and thereby achieved the limit of luxury, hot and cold laid on in what was practically his bedroom. This hour of dressing was always his happiest of the day. By then the awful shindy in his stomach had generally ceased, or, at any rate, not yet begun: like most men, when it came to the point he liked the sensations of the cleaning process, and on these cold mornings every garment added meant comfort piled upon comfort, with the warm, neat, respectable feeling of the complete toilet at the end. Owen always sang in his bathroom. Mary could hear him now, in between the appalling rasp of his razor across the night's growth:

"John Brown's body's full of maggots in its grave"

and

"Who dr-r-ank his blood?
I, said the Linnet,
I'll bring it up in a minute,
I drank his——"

scratch, scratch, scratch, and then the silence that she knew meant a difficult bit done and Owen's face peering, to see the result, at its enormous distorted image in the shaving-glass. Mary shivered. Owen always chose sinister or common or dirty ditties, and she had waked from dreams of Messervy with "Sea Dream" furious in her head. . . . He had finished with "Cock Robin" now, and turned to another form of self-entertainment which invariably nearly gave her hysterics: he made noises like a tap dripping, with his mouth: gop, gop, gop, implacable, maddening: then he turned to horse-trotting: clack-clack, clack-clack, clever really, but how *awful*. . . . "Owen, for goodness' sake stop making that bloody row," she yelled out, in a minute. She knew that meant a quarrel, and she knew also that only a quarrel just then would save her from going lunatic.

Owen appeared in the door-way, half his face blue-black, the other half faintly pink and shining, a razor edged with dirty, speckled lather in his hand. His rage was tremendous: it blew at her across the room and stirred up the hairs on her back. She could always rouse him up in a minute by swearing at him.

"You common woman!"

"You club-man!" she yelled at him, with frenzied glee. "Go and stand on a table and drink and sing your dirty songs to your vulgar friends! Go on the halls and be a raffy ventriloquist. It's an audience you want."

"You're mad," he said, staring at her. He really was convinced at that moment that she was mad. More than once she had said, smiling, that his golfing friends were a rowdy lot, but never before had she showed this venom. . . . Mary, jealous of his club, was incredible, a thought one couldn't entertain. He was so surprised that he forgot his temper and, finding the soap beginning to drip off his razor on to the carpet, turned and walked quietly out of the room.

Mary, furiously coiling her hair with the remains of her unspent passion, saw in the glass Messervy's picture of herself and Owen, balancing on the end of a pole above space, biding the final push that would send her whirling off into that waiting ecstasy. She realised then that the issue did indeed, as Messervy had said, lie in other hands than her own, not necessarily in his, but at any rate beyond hers. No fury or beastliness that she could draw Owen into, nothing beyond endurance that she could discover within him, as this morning she had discovered him unendurable, would

avail her that push, that freedom. . . . Because, whether in his oldness, or his rages, or his worn-out passion, or what, perhaps even in his little, tawdry songs that agonised her—at the end of it all, somehow, Owen could still recall in her the "pity which passeth understanding," such as not even she, the savage, the whore, the beast, could completely withstand.

V

Messervy was coining money in those days, and he felt a certain amount of embarrassment over how to convey to Owen his share of the profits. The play, as a matter of fact, was coming off in March; it had cooled off suddenly, as that type, after a hot run, will sometimes do, but he had made a pile in the interim, Wyndham's were after his work, and his verses, out before Christmas, were doing extraordinarily well. Money suited him, he could carry off every penny he made, and everyone knew he would make more. Mary, with no eye for her own clothes, longed for the summer, when she could see him in prosperous flannels. . . . He accosted Owen in earnest just before the end of the Prince's run, and, placing before him some neat statements of accounts, asked leave to suggest a profit-sharing basis that would settle

his conscience towards his benefactor, which, he said, might mean better sleep than he had had for some time. Owen, thinking of certain nocturnal agonies of his own lately, was moved to kindliness in his reply. "My dear fellow, I don't want your money."

"I didn't exactly do you that injustice."

"Well, what——"

Messervy said, twirling his Onoto: "Any normal man likes to get his debts off his chest so soon as he can."

"I tell you I don't want your money. . . . I didn't take you up to make a blooming bank out of you. I get the reflection of your success, and I get the consciousness of having, once in my life, at least, made a sound literary judgment." He held out his hand. "If *you're* satisfied——"

Messervy took his hand, but said, slowly: "As a matter of fact I'm not. . . . One doesn't want to sound too boorish, but I've a particular objection to being indebted for any thing to any man."

"Then that's something you've developed since you left off dining in Fleet Street." Owen snapped promptly. He wished Messervy wouldn't worry and go on. The world was too full of too many words: they flew about him all day long lately, and dropped on his soul like red-hot bullets, painfully riddling it.

"Not exactly. Fleet Street was a sort of interim. And anyway, you can look on it as placing me still further in your debt if you like, but a settlement of this money business——"

Owen turned on him and blasphemed. It had become a habit with him lately, whenever the shower of red-hot bullets threatened to become unbearable, to put up this umbrella of profanity whereby to save his soul alive. Between his neurosis and Mary's light-hearted oaths, their domestic atmosphere at times was barely decent. Mary, who couldn't keep servants, had begun to blame his temper for their defections, and he didn't know how to reply to that except by more vituperations, which only went to prove her point. Oh, it was, he often thought, a happy little hog-sty in those days, and the hog Mary had the whip-hand. But Messervy was fair game, he couldn't, or wouldn't hit back.

"Throw your reasty money in the river if you want, but for the sake of Christ, don't bother *me* with it."

Messervy looked at him, moved his lips, and then threw whatever was in his mind to the winds and quietly walked out. The elder man, confused still with his own vehemence, found himself mechanically parting his hair with wet fingers

before the little mirror above his desk, where, long ago in the old Richmond study, a mystic Mary had been wont to throw swift, clumsy glances, reassuring herself beneath his gaze. . . . The damp impromptu comb left his hair in greasy tags, and among each one of these he could count a few grey hairs. The face, too, that glowered back, had peevish lines running slant-wise from the mouth, and pouches began to drop under its eyes. He was getting old. Mary was making him old. With her temper and useless wildness, she was sowing in him these wormy, mildewed fungii of decay. It struck him then, with the sure trend of the neurotic towards bodily relief, that he would get more out of Mary, she didn't pay in fair coin for all he had to put up with in her. This game of making him dance to her errant passion had gone on long enough. It would be nice, it would be right and just for him to take her and break her and make her dance to him instead.

For one thing, it was high time they thought about having another child.

VI

Mary was playing tennis in the remains of the daylight with young Carters from Southfields,

breezy boys he had introduced to her through old Carter of the club. Mary was a splendid tennis-woman, and she played with every drop of blood in her body. Owen stood in the solid shadow of the rose arch, feeling rather old and fat, watching the last sett, which was a conqueror. Mary and George Carter, who was dark, huge and full-blooded, and reminded him vaguely of young Biss of Richmond days, had taken on the fairer, less elephantine Catalink alone, and the bloodshed was great. "Cat" Carter had something of a reputation in his own suburb, he was regarded with disfavour in local tournaments by lesser stars who coveted his glory, and he had twice walked the velvet of the centre court at All-England, which was something. He sprang through the long reaches of his one-sided game like some rushing white dusk moth: a flap of the wing as he passed, and immediately the two others across the net were up and dancing to his will, obedient marionettes.... "Your 'vantage, Pussy," Mary called out of the dusk for the third time, and braced herself to meet the service that meant death if she failed, crouching from the stomach like a boy, with a chin thrust out beyond the shadow of the poplars, so that her head gave the impression of having been severed from the body and hung on some invisible string

in space. The ball sang unseen over the net, left Mary's helpless racquet with no visible effort on Mary's part, and, returning, took George Carter's arm high up into the air for a smasher: Owen could hear the spinning sush-sh-sh of it played hard and true into the uttermost corner, and had a vision of a knotted Catalink digging something out of the ground with the tip of his racquet. Then Mary and George together rushed violently into the middle of the net, collided, and subsided into a sighing heap ground-wards.

"Game, I think," Catalink remarked pleasantly, strolling to the rescue. "Anybody hurt? Good swift rally that, Mrs. Gawne."

George was helping Mary to her feet. He took hold of her under her arms, his hands closed slightly over her chest, and the strength by which he drew her upwards was a live and visible thing. Owen shook suddenly from head to foot. Who was George Carter that he should lift his wife about in that violently repressed manner? A cub of twenty-five. . . . Mary was not shocked or annoyed to be handled like that, she was pleased. He could see perfectly plainly how she pressed slightly against the imprisoning hands and leant for a second against Carter while she found her feet, for a second after that. And a moment later

Catalink had her exquisite ankle in his hands, pinching her and feeling her for a sprain. Mary's expression, as she balanced on the one foot, looking down at that imprisoned one, was perfectly indescribable, but he knew what it said as clearly as if she had shouted to him across the court. Was Mary really like that? He realised, with a shudder, that she had justly and honestly warned him and he had allowed the personal equation to get the better of his sane judgment. Now, with this sudden awful clarity, his mind went back over the road he had travelled in company with Mary, pointing out without pity every landmark that should have warned him of the ultimate goal. The man from the Guildhall, Richardson at Blairmore, Biss and Berrington, and a dozen others at Richmond whom he now could clearly recall. Messervy. These Carter cubs. First of all, and, when it came to the naked truth, no more veritably than any of the others, himself. . . . That thought meant agony, and he ground his teeth and found, as ever, a refuge in anger from pain. Very well, if any man could have Mary, he would have her too. He would take her, as any of these persons could have taken her, and break her up into little bits for his pleasure.

If she were true to her salt, Mary would like that.

He strode out of the shadow and called to them with authority across the light dusk. "Mary! Come in to supper. It's too dark for you to play any more."

VII

At supper the three tennis players fell into a violent and, as usual, fruitless discussion anent the nature of the parable to be found in the story "They": Mary, who had lately discovered Kipling as a short-story writer, started it, and the two Carters struggled gallantly in this sea, wishing they could play at tennis instead of at talk, to fulfil the conventional requirement which decrees that appetite shall be covered and denied by increased intellectual activity.

"All young people adore Kipling, he flatters their intellects": Owen said, and looked at them all in turn to see how they liked that. He was content, he would make himself content for these few polite hours, to play Father William to their youth, to sit by listening, as the old should, to their chatter, slipping in his sage remarks now and again, kindly and tolerant and envious as the old should be envious. . . . But later, when her two puppies had gone, Mary should know that he too was a man, who knew what the tug of desire might be

in a strong, young body, whose blood had not yet learned to saunter with easy ebb and unregretful flow. He would teach her, and if he could not teach, he would drag her along with him, unlearned.

Mary said, laughing: "Kipling squashes *my* intellect out flat and leaves it for dead! I never knew how dead until I picked up a Concordance to his works and began to see something of the by-ways of his craft. That made me feel physically sick.

"One can forgive anything in an author except solid knowledge."

"Knowledge beyond your own, you mean," Owen corrected her.

"Yes, but it's a question of degree. I don't mind Simmonds knowing more about garden manures than I do. . . . Kipling is, he must be, informed of God, and it's personally annoying to me that he, not I, should have been the chosen one."

"Well, he didn't get any of his information out of the Almighty too easy, I'll lay that," said George, splitting an apple for Mary with the same obvious pride of muscle which Messervy had once displayed in the bursting of walnuts. "Kipling's *strong* wine and ragin': his stuff's all pepper and

mustard: he doesn't have any truck with love's languors and all that jolly Shelley stuff." He looked at Mary with widened eyes as he spoke, and, handing her the dissected apple, their fingers touched. Catalink was also watching Mary, with a queer expression: "with his ears laid back," Owen said to himself instinctively, and kicked Mary under the table to close up the meal. Soon after that, with a decent interval in the drawing room where, over Mary's shoulders, they roared the "Just So Songs" and snatches from "Tom Jones" and "Merrie England" with healthy enjoyment, they left.

Owen, in his study, called his wife to him. "Mary, just a minute."

She came obediently, yawning.

"Do you like those Carter people?"

"They're good little sports," she said, after a minute's thought.

"Yes, but do you *like* them? Are you keen on 'em at all?"

"I don't know what you mean. . . . Keen? *No.* They make a jolly little evening, don't they?"

Owen crossed over to her and took hold of her arm at the sensitive bony part just below the elbow. "I won't have all this pawing and looking from men you don't care a rap about."

"You're mad! and, curse you, Owen, stop pinching my arm!"

He relaxed his grip, but made no attempt to release her, neither did she struggle. He thought with contempt that beneath her, under her anger, she was voluptuously yielding, straining to his pressure as, two hours ago, she had yielded and strained to George Carter.

He at least, though he could desire her like other men, unlike other men could pierce beneath her desirablity and possess her afresh, with scorn and loathing, true, but with the utter possession that utter comprehension alone can give.

Incidentally, it was good to hinder Mary's freedom by that fettering of her arm, to feel, when he gripped it, the bone come through his flesh, sharply meeting his bone. He was learning, oh, he was learning fast, how to deal with Mary.

"No, I'm not mad. I might, perhaps, later go a bit Berserk. . . . You're a lascivious little beast, Mary, no one sees that more clearly than I do. You want an animal to deal with you properly. Perhaps I'm not enough that animal, perhaps I am. One doesn't know. . . . There's something of the butterfly in us all, of course, I grant that. Flitting from flower to flower, you *know*. But it's damnable when one finds that

sort of thing in a woman: I don't know why, unfairly damnable, perhaps, but there it is. And one tries to cure it. . . . I can't cure you. I can't even properly coerce you. But there's that way of grabbing what one can out of a wreck—

"I'm going to grab *you*——"

He brought her, with that slow, visible strength which he had watched, murderously, put forth by George Carter, hard into his arms. Just beneath his chin he knew her lips awaited him, terrible lips, hungry, and yet sickened. . . . "You're a rotten, bony, useless sort of a thing to hold, Mary. Laths and straw-stalks. . . . But what there is of you, *I'm* going to hold. Don't forget that."

She said, a moment later, with an angelic smile: "When you've finished stoving in my ribs, what do you do next? You could throw me on the dust-heap—supposing you've the strength to carry me so far—or you can drag me about by my hair. . . . I'm only trying to help your part, Owen. I hate half-and-half business."

He said, cheerfully: "Oh, lots, you won't be bored, never fear. There's the question of a son and heir, for one thing."

By that, then, for the sake of keeping or conquering Mary, he had at last and for the first time in his life achieved coarseness. He couldn't even

go back from that. And to go back, anyhow, would mean defeat. . . . But not even he could fathom the expression of Mary's face when he spoke of another child. It came, it went, he couldn't define or describe it, he only knew something passed that was beyond sensation, that was pain and joy and fear and yet none of them, and so essentially something of Mary he couldn't forget or dismiss it. He could only reflect, stupidly, watching light break and play upon the windows as he opened the study shutters to the full blaze of the moon, that just so, for an instant of ecstasy and of agony, Mary's soul had broken forth and played across her mocking, blind, indifferent face.

VIII

Later, he went upstairs with a drumming heart and his pulses all anyhow, to take his toll of Mary's defiance. But the handle of her door wouldn't turn. He wedged the bottom of the door inwards with his foot, and found that it was, indeed, fastened at the keyhole: the handle must have stuck, but the little brass bolt the other side had been shot as well. He rattled it, softly, thinking of the *maids*, and then he bent down and called Mary in

a whisper several times through the keyhole. Listening, after that, he couldn't hear anything but the squidgy tick of the coach clock on their mantelpiece and Mary's loud, regular, ugly breathing.

CHAPTER VII

I

He who has survived a nervous collapse has been to the core of life and death and back again.

In the study, with his head stuck out of the window into the late, muggy air, that imminent dissolution of body and soul which was all the name Owen could give his disorder, and which had hung over him for weeks, came nearer than ever, receded, came back again, was death, was lunacy, was that horror beyond the ken or comprehension of man which neurotic persons, not religiously inclined, catch glimpses of and afterwards remember as an incontrovertible proof of the existence of hell. In between whiles, when the extreme horror had receded, he found little horrors to torment himself with: the oddest and most idiotic things: the stir of the leaves on the trees he knew was dreadful and agonising, and a hole in the hearth-rug tortured him: the number of stars in the sky came creeping into his brain and nearly burst it. . . . All the time he held himself with the grip of

the dying, his stomach, because he knew if he let go of it for one instant it would drop out through his entrails, his feet and his chest, even, at one time, his lips he held together, desperately, with finger and thumb, till the ache of the bruise joined itself on to his other torments and it was better to face even dissolution than keep that hold.

"I've been too worked up," he told the unsympathetic room from time to time. "I knew *something* would burst, sometime.

"Mary oughtn't to have locked me out like that.

"Mary, the coarse little tick——"

At about three o'clock the nervous spasms began to lessen, and he came out of his whimperings into the more definite sensations of anger and a desire for bullying. He must, he knew, punish Mary when the day came for defying him, and he must do it in his new coarse way which Mary could only understand. He would beat her, but he had to decide where and how. He must not hit her breast, because that gave life, nor her face, because by that he would remember her. And he must not hold her by the throat, though the thought of that could drag him back in a second from horrors. Mary had a little pulse in the side of her throat that had used to beat against his

lips like kisses. . . . When one had dragged oneself back to sanity again by the thought of Mary's helpless throat in one's hand, one knew that there was nothing in the world so sweet as that faint, delicate kiss of Mary's pulse upon one's lips. Mary was not really coarse and lascivious. In her loving she could be extraordinarily shy and wild and bird-like, fluttering tremulously, under one's hand. It was he, Owen, who was teaching her to be coarse.

"I am an old, disgusting man," he whimpered suddenly to the window-sash, shivering. "I have taught my dirty old body these dirty tricks. On purpose, with my eyes open. . . .

"Out of cleanness I have brought this filth. . . . And called it Mary——"

In the whitish light his hands, gripping the sill, looked brown and drawn and wizened, the veins stood out hideously, as knotted and fatly purple as those of an aged person. With those two unsavoury old hands he had proposed to hold and degrade Mary's slim, white, fine, delicate body.

"Whatever I do, whatever I am, I am not fit to spoil Mary."

Mary was like a nervous horse, needing coaxing and assurance: she was no worse than a moody *little* monkey that didn't know its own devilment.

He must make up his mind to forgive her selfishness, a big inclusive selfishness with a capital letter and a line under it, and under that heading would come toleration of an hundred and one little irritations whereby she had chafed him during these long and dreary months.

"Toleration, the prayer of the world. Man's final, crowning mercy to his fellow.

"Live and let live."

He groaned aloud when he remembered that Mary had bolted him out of his own bedroom—their bedroom. But he thought of Martha then, whom he had loved and loathed and betrayed, and to one of whose lives at least he had put an end with the callous, careless confidence of God. Upon that confidence, that easy, thoughtless handling of fates, hung the certain unhappiness of three people, Martha's and Mary's and his own, and that of no one knew how many possible others. Martha had unravelled her tangle first: she had married, quietly, in the spring, Berrington's barrister brother, and from all he could hear she was happy. But his and Mary's still remained, were painfully in the untangling now.

Persons spoke of God as the Author, the Mover, the Creator and Governor of all things. But God was more crafty than that. By shifting His re-

sponsibilities on to the shoulders of men, in giving them this blind power to deal irrevocably with lives, He had cunningly created in them His need, for guidance of their fumbling hands, for sight to pick the threads aright. . . .

He told himself, thinking of Mary in her culprit's bed upstairs, and with Martha's warm beauty bright before him: "Never do the last thing, the worst thing, the unforgivable thing that means only ending. Death alone knows no consequences.

"Half a wife is better than no mate."

When daylight had become a certainty he rose, stiff and shivering, and once more climbed the stairs to Mary's room, knowing, beyond any doubt, that from now on nothing would quench the bonfire in his brain but to feel again that life that beat in Mary's throat pressing warm, swift kisses on his lips, and Mary's shy messages of reunion brushing there, breathing here, scattering the months that frowned behind them, as blowing wind can break and scatter ash.

II

He would call her penitently through the keyhole. He would knock first, softly, to wake her,

and then whisper his contrition. if that failed, he would write a note and shove it under the door. He knew there was nothing sulky about Mary. Probably already she had repented and unlocked the door, sorry for his sleepless night.

As a matter of fact, Mary's door, when he came in sight of it round the bend of the stairs, was not only unlocked but wide open. He had not heard her come downstairs, but the study was off the main track of the house. Perhaps she had got up early to wander in the garden; those kinds of things were possible to Mary, and more especially to a perturbed Mary. He put his head into the empty bathroom as he crossed the landing, and then passed, stepping softly, for he didn't know what reason, into their bedroom.

It was all very melodramatic and silly, but Mary's bed was certainly made. It sat solidly on its four brass legs and stared at him, creaseless, decorously quilted, and its head crowned by Mary's linen night-dress case with her night-dress neatly bulging inside it. On the top of the case, also very neat, lay an open book.

Mary, even if she had dressed and wandered out, wasn't given to making her own bed at four o'clock in the morning.

He crossed more loudly to the bed, and took the

book in his hand. It was a volume of Messervy's poems, open at the flyleaf, upon which was inscribed in Messervy's niggly, writer's fist:

"Mrs. Gawne,
in grateful remembrance,
FRANCIS HENRY MESSERVY,
December 25th, 19—."

It was not a presentation copy, but a bijou suède edition, such as can be seen nowadays dignifying the works of famous or popular pen-men at most stationers and book-sellers round about Christmas time. Messervy had bought it for her himself, paying his three-and-sixpence like any other gift-hunter, and Owen could remember how Mary had appreciated the attention, ranking his slim gift above the most gorgeous copy procurable.

"Author's copies are for useful people and relations," she had declared, her eyes upon that same inscription which stared back at him, foolishly, from between his hands. "Only for a friend one would pay money to buy one's own work."

Owen put the volume back where he had found it, and set himself to a methodical search of the house for his wife. He knew, when he found her hat and coat gone—Mary's sloppety hat! slung

on a peg in the hall like any man's, and the coat she wouldn't ever be persuaded to put away—that there was something more than a mere dawn-prowl in the garden to be reckoned with, and following out that train of evidence he missed, later, her spandy new brown suitcase from the box-room. Its pink flannel cover, a relic from Martha days which Mary hated, lay in a heap on the floor with the mark of a foot in dust across it—Mary's foot.

"You fool, Mary," said Owen to that footmark, envisaging a dramatic revenge. "Running away—like a boarding-school brat."

It wasn't till he came wandering back into the bedroom, helplessly dragging the flannel cover by a string behind him, and his eyes were once more directed to that book of Messervy's, balanced with such idiotic precision upon the hump of Mary's night-gown, that glimmerings of light began to break in upon his irritation at her childishness. Mary wasn't tidy or careful: she might just as well have thrown down the book she'd been scanning on her bed as a hair-brush, or a shoe, or any of the intimate articles he had become used, since his second marriage, to finding in awkward and unexpected and inexpedient places. But the combination of the carelessly flung volume and the neat bed, the orderly room, the meticulously sym-

metrical case, didn't hold truth. Mary was all or none, in these lesser things as truly as in the greater. He took the book up once again, a part of him handling it gingerly because it was the property of a suddenly remote and mystical Mary, another part examining, with slow, detached, interest, the strength of the suède and the stitching, how and where best it would tear. . . .

All the time, above these various emotional aspects and disturbances, he coldly reviewed within his soul the knowledge that Mary had put the book there, with care and forethought, and had put it for a sign.

. . . . . .

Mary had gone with Messervy, and that was the end of that.

As with all the others, he had to take this crisis to the study, where light had now settled fully, flung up, as it were, from the huge reflector of the golf course lake below. Messervy's portrait, missing the farthest rays from the window, was in shadow: he took it down and placed it before him in the cold glare of early sunlight: his own face he could review in the mirror, nothing missed, and he was childishly determined that Messervy should have no advantage over him. The book

of verse he still held in his hands, tightly, waiting for the unbearable moment.

That was the end of that pretty story.

Mary, of course, would tire of Messervy just as she had tired of him: there would arrive on the scene a Carter, or a Richardson, or a Biss, and Messervy also would walk the house looking for his wife, who had left him to go to another man in the middle of the night. There was nothing, when he came to think of it, to touch his coxcomb vanity in Mary's defection. Messervy, if he liked, might be more beautiful than Adonis and have the genius of a dozen Swinburnes. The great, the horrible, the unsustainable thing was that he, Owen Gawne, had been given two women in his life, above the most of his fellows, and had been able to keep neither of them. Martha and Mary, he could see more and more clearly, as he stood them up in his mind, the two little, grinning, indifferent figures, and looked at them, represented the uttermost poles of their sex. In between them marched the legions of the feminine universe. If he had had fifty thousand wives it would have been the same: in losing these two, the Alpha and the Omega, he had lost all.

"Was the fault mine?" asked Messervy, plaintively, at the head of a verse that caught his

eye as he flipped the thick, rough-edged pages over.

"Was it I who estranged us?"

"Was it his? Was it he?"

He wondered then if it mattered at whose door the business might be laid, since it had happened.

It was all very sad. If he thought upon the sadness of his position much more he knew it was highly likely that he would drop a few tears.

Telling the servants would be a nasty business. . . .

At times like this, when one was made to face failure all along the line, the gay, everyday denial of lives beyond death became, one felt, slightly supercilious and overdone. If it were, indeed, really all, the preciousness of one's three-score-and-ten could not, should not, would not be allowed to be marred and rendered of no account by these stupid mistakes, these out-calculations.

Meanwhile, across this particular one of his lives (and, since he still drew the breath that is this life, he might as well face it) he must be content to write, Failed.

Failure, well, it was that. His wives had brought him failure. His horrible, stupid wives——

In a flash, then, sitting all alone, so old and un-

savoury and sorry for himself, in the dusty study, he envisaged his freedom. The end, not of dignity, of hope, of attainment, not of any of these things, but of that failure which, with hurtful, ridiculous, struggling tears, he had called upon himself to own. Slowly, following it out word by word, he remembered how, long ago, he had realised that Mary had come at the wrong end of his life. It was true, it was true. . . . Not Mary alone. Martha, if she had lived in these later years of his, if her slower blood had met his, he could have held, even as his youth could have held Mary. But—he took his head tightly in his hands to keep it together while he pieced out these last truths—it went further than that, he was already beyond even that. With the cruel clarity of the present looking upon the past, he saw stretching behind him in long vistas his weakness, the gradual heart-breaking debility of his manhood, his weakness, his weakness, his weakness. . . . Women, Martha and Mary at their uttermost antipodes of womanhood, had made him weak. Even now, above all this new clarity and courage, the thought of them shook his heart in his breast. . . . Without women he would have been strong.

The wages of love is death. Above all men he knew that, whose yoke and whose hire from the

beginning had been love. But at the last he knew, also, that the wages of death is Everlasting Life. "Except ye be born again. . . ."

He stood up. He was strong and free. He had cast them behind him; of his strength he had cast them out, even as they had cast him out, but with the greater strength which is the truth proceeding from God.

"If there is one person as good and decent as I am remaining at the end of all," he told the morning sun, aloud, "God could not feel His work had been in vain."

He walked with a firm step to his bookcase, that covered half the wall opposite the desk, and, turning Messervy's slim volume in his hands, gingerly, for fear of spoiling the suède, placed it with care and precision among the rest.

THE END.

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